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# ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

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# 'THE MYTH OF STEVENSON'

# CHAPTER I

## 'THE MYTH OF STEVENSON'

In this brief study of Stevenson I propose to follow a somewhat unusual course; or to sketch what may be considered a rather eccentric outline. It can only be justified in practice; and I have a healthy fear that my practice will not justify it. Nevertheless, I have not adopted it without considerable thought, and even doubt, about the best way of dealing with a real and practical problem. So before it collapses completely in practice, I will give myself the triumph and the joy of justifying it in principle.

The difficulty arises thus. In the great days of Stevenson critics had begun to be ashamed of being critics, and of giving to their ancient function the name of criticism. It was the fashion to publish a book that was a bundle of reviews and to call it 'Appreciations.' But the world advances; and if that sort of book is published now, it might well bear the general title of

'Depreciations.' Stevenson has suffered more than most from this new fashion of minimising and finding fault; and some energetic and successful writers have thrown themselves into the business almost with the eagerness of stockbrokers, bent on making a slump instead of a boom in Stevenson Stock. It may be questioned whether we need welcome the bear any more than the bull in the china-shop of elegant English letters. Others seem to make quite a hobby of proving a particular writer to be overrated. They write long and laborious articles, full of biographical detail and bitter commentary, in order to show that the subject is unworthy of attention; and write pages upon Stevenson to prove that he is not worth writing about. Neither their motives nor their methods are very clear or satisfactory. If it be true that all swans are geese to the discriminating eye of the scientific ornithologist, it hardly suffices to explain so long or so fatiguing a wild-goose chase.

But it is true that, in a sense more general than that of these rather irritable

individuals, such a reaction does exist. And it is a reaction against Stevenson, or at least against Stevensonians. Perhaps it would be most correct to call it a reaction against Stevensoniana. And let me say at this early stage that I heartily agree that there has been far too much Stevensoniana. In one sense, indeed, everything about anybody so interesting as Stevenson is interesting. In one sense, everything about everybody is interesting. But not everybody can interest everybody else: and it is well to know an author is loved, but not to publish all the love-letters. Sometimes we only had to endure that most awful and appalling tragedy: a truth told once too often. Sometimes we heard Stevensonian sentiments repeated in violation of all Stevensonian rules. For of all things he hated dilutior: and loved to take language neat, like a liqueur. In short, it was overdone; it was too noisy and yet all on one note; above all, it was too incessant and too prolonged. As I say, there were a variety of causes, which it would be unnecessary and sometimes unamiable to discuss. There was

perhaps something in it of the very virtue of Stevenson; he was tolerant of many societies and interested in many men; and there was nothing to ward off the direst results of the men being interested in him. Especially after he was dead, one person after another turned up and wrote a book about meeting Stevenson on a steamboat or in a restaurant; and it is not surprising that such book-makers began to look as vulgar as bookies. There was perhaps something in it of the old joke of Johnson: that the Scots are in a conspiracy to praise each other. It was often because the Scots are secret sentimentalists and cannot always keep the secret. Their interest in a story so brilliant and in some ways so pathetic was perfectly natural and human; but for all that, their interest was over-done. It was sometimes, I regret to say, because the interest might fairly be called a vested interest. Anyhow, any number of things happened to combine to vulgarise the thing; but vulgarising a thing does not really make it vulgar.

Now Stevenson's life was really what we call picturesque; partly because he saw

everything in pictures; and partly because a chapter of accidents did really attach him to very picturesque places. He was born on the high terraces of the noblest of northern cities: in the family mansion in Edinburgh in 1850; he was the son of a house of highly respected architects of lighthouses; and nothing could be more really romantic than such a legend of men laboriously lifting the star-crowned towers of the sea. He failed to follow the family tradition, however, for various reasons; he was blighted with ill-health and a taste for art; the latter sent him to pick up picturesque tricks and poses in the art colony of Barbizon; the former very soon sent him southward into warmer and warmer climates; and it so happens, as he himself remarked, that the countries to which we are sent when health deserts us have a magical and rather mocking beauty. At one time he had paid a sort of vagabond visit to America, crossing the ugly plains that lead to the abrupt beauty of California, that promised land. He described it in the studies called *Across the Plains*: a work vaguely unsatisfying both to writer

and reader. I think it records the subconscious blank and sense of bewilderment felt by every true European on first seeing the very light and landscape of America. The shock of negation was in his case truly unnatural. He almost wrote a dull book. But there is another reason for noting this exception here.

This book makes no pretence of being even an outline of the life of Stevenson. In his particular case I deliberately omit such an outline, because I find that it has cut across and confused the very sharp and lucid outline of his art. But indeed in any case it would be very difficult to tell the tale with truth without telling it in detail, and in rather bewildering detail. The first thing that strikes us, on a rapid survey of his life and letters, is his innumerable changes of domicile, especially in his early days. If his friends followed the example he professes to set, in the matter of Mr. Michael Finsbury, and refused to learn more than one address for one friend, he must have left his correspondence very far behind indeed. His wanderings in Western Europe would

appear on the map as much wilder as well as wider than the 'probable course of David Balfour's wanderings' in Western Scotland. If we started out to tell his story thus, we should have to note how he went first to Mentone and then back again to Edinburgh and then to Fontainebleau and then to the Highlands and then to Fontainebleau again and then to Davos in the mountains, and so on; a zigzag pilgrimage impossible to compress except in a larger biography. But all or most of it is covered by one generalisation. This navigation chart was really a hospital chart. Its jagged mountains represented temperatures; or at least climates. The whole story of Stevenson is conditioned by a certain complexity, which a tenderness for the English language will restrain us from calling a complex. It was a sort of paradox, by which he was at once more and less protected than other men; like somebody travelling the wildest roads of the world in a covered waggon. He went where he did partly because he was an adventurer and partly because he was an invalid. By that sort of limping agility,

he may be said to have seen at once too little and too much. He was perhaps a natural traveller; but he was not a normal traveller. Nobody ever did treat him as quite normal; which is the truth hidden in the falsehood of those who sneer at his childishness as that of a spoilt child. He was courageous; and yet he had to be shielded against two things at once, his weakness and his courage. But his picture of himself as a vagabond with blue fingers on the winter road is avowedly an ideal picture; it was exactly that sort of freedom that he could never have. He could only be carried from sight to sight; or even from adventure to adventure. Indeed there is here a curious aptness in the quaint simplicity of his childish rhyme that ran, 'My bed is like a little boat.' Through all his varied experiences his bed was a boat and his boat was a bed. Panoramas of tropic palm and Californian orange-grove passed over that moving couch like the long nightmare of the nursery walls. But his real courage was not so much turned outwards to the drama of the boat as inwards to the drama of the

bed. Nobody knew better than he did that nothing is more terrible than a bed; since it is always waiting to be a death-bed.

Broadly speaking, therefore, his biography would consist of journeys hither and thither, with a donkey in the Cevennes, with a baronet on the French canals; on a sledge in Switzerland or in a bathchair at Bournemouth. But they were all, in one way or another, related to the problem of his health as well as to the cheerfulness of his curiosity. Now of all human things the search for health is the most unhealthy. And it is truly a great glory to Stevenson that he, almost alone among men, could go on pursuing his bodily health without once losing his mental health. As soon as he came to any place, he lost no time in finding a new and better reason for having come there. It might be a child or a sonnet, a flirtation or the plan of a story; but he made that the real reason; and not the unhealthy reason of health. Nevertheless, there generally had been, somewhere in the background, some suggestion of the reason

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of health ; as there was in that last great journey to his final home in the South Seas.

The one real break, I suspect, in this curious double process of protection and risk, was his break-away to America, which arose partly at least in connection with the matter of his marriage. It seemed to his friends and family, not so much like the conduct of an invalid who had done a bolt from the hospital, as the conduct of a lunatic unaccountably loose from the asylum. In truth, the voyage struck them as less mad than the marriage. As this is not a biographical study, I need not go deeply into the delicate disputes about that business ; but it was admittedly at least unconventional. All that matters to the argument here is that, while there was much in it that was even noble, it was not normal. It was not love as it should come to youth : it is no disrespect to either to say that in both, psychologically speaking, there was an element of patching up as well as of binding together. Stevenson had met, first in Paris and later in America, an

American lady married to a seemingly somewhat unsatisfactory American gentleman, against whom she took proceedings for divorce. Stevenson at the same time precipitately crossed the seas and in some sense pursued her to California; I suppose with some vague idea of being in at the death; and indeed he was very nearly in at his own. The escapade brought on him one of the worst and sharpest of his attacks of illness; the lady, being on the spot, naturally threw herself into nursing him; and as soon as he could stand on two rickety legs they were married. It caused consternation to his family, who were however really reconciled afterwards, it would seem, by the personal magnetism of his foreign and almost exotic bride. Certainly in her society his literary work went with a renewed swing and even regularity; and the rest of his story is practically the story of his important works; varied by his, if possible, still more important friendships. There was illness, in which, it should be said, it was often a case of two invalids nursing each other. Then came the decision to fall

back on the secure climate of the Pacific Islands; which led to his taking up his last station at Vailima on the island of Samoa: in a coloured archipelago which our cheerful forefathers might have described as the Cannibal Islands, but which Stevenson was more disposed to describe as the Islands of the Blest. There he lived as happily as can an exile who loves his country and his friends, free at least of all the daily dangers of his lung trouble; and there he died, very suddenly, at the age of forty-four, the beloved patriarch of a little white and brown community, to whom he was known as Tusitala or the Teller of Tales.

That is the main outline of the actual biography of Robert Louis Stevenson; and from the time when he clambered as a boy among the crags and castellations of the Painted Hill, looking across the islets of the Forth, to the time when tall brown barbarians, crowned with red flowers, bore him on their spears to the peak of their sacred mountain, the spirit of this artist had been permitted to inhabit, and as it were to haunt, the beauti-

ful places of the earth. To the last he had tasted that beauty with a burning sensibility; and it is no joke, in his case, to say that he would have enjoyed coming to his own funeral. Of course, even this generalisation is too much of a simplification. He was not, as we shall later have occasion to note, unacquainted with sombre nor, alas, with sordid surroundings. Oscar Wilde said with some truth that Stevenson might have produced yet richer and more purple romances if he had always lived in Gower Street; and he was certainly one of the very few who have managed to feel fierce and adventurous at Bournemouth. But broadly speaking, it is true that the outline of his life was romantic; and was therefore perhaps too easily turned into a romance. He himself deliberately turned it into a romance; but not all those romancing were such good romancers as he. So the romance tended to turn into mere repetition and gossip; and the romantic figure faded into journalism as the figure of Robin Hood faded into endless penny dreadfuls or schoolboy serials; as the figure of

Micawber was multiplied and cheapened into Ally Sloper. Then came the reaction; a reaction which I should call rather excusable than justifiable. But that reaction is the problem in any popular treatment of him to-day.

Now if I were to follow here the natural course of such a volume as this, I should have to begin by telling slowly and systematically the tale that I have just told rapidly and briefly. I should have to give a chapter to his childhood, to his favourite aunt and his yet more beloved nurse, and to all the things much more clearly recorded in *A Child's Garden of Verses*. I should have to give a chapter to his youth, his differences with his father, his struggles with his malady, his greater struggles about his marriage; working up slowly through the whole length of the book to the familiar picture of so many magazines and memoirs; the slender semi-tropical Tusitala with his long brown hair and long olive face and long strange slits of eyes, sitting clad in white or crowned with garlands and telling tales to all the tribes of men. Now the

misfortune of all this would be that it would amount to saying, through a slow series of chapters, that there is nothing more to be said about Stevenson except what has been said a thousand times. It would be to suggest that Stevenson's serious fame does still really depend on this string of picturesque accidents; and that there is really nothing to be told of him, except that he wore long hair in the Savile Club or light clothes in the Samoan mountains. His life really was romantic; but to repeat that romance is like re-printing the *Scarlet Pimpernel* or offering the world an entirely new portrait of Rudolph Valentino. It is against this repetition that the reaction has set in; perhaps wrongly but certainly strongly. And to spin it out through the whole of this book would be to give the impression (which I should mildly resent) that this book is only the thousandth unnecessary volume of Stevensoniana. However I told his story in detail, though it were with all the sympathy I feel, I could not avoid that suggestion of a sort of jaded journalism. Stevenson's picturesque atti-

tude and career are rather in his way at this moment; not for me, because I like the picturesque, but for this new pose which may be called the pose of the prosaic. To these unfortunate realists, to say that there were all these romantic things about him is only another way of saying that there was nothing in him. And there was a very great deal in him. I am driven to adopt some other method of bringing it out.

When I come to describing it, I find it is perhaps even more difficult to describe it than to do it. But something of this sort is what I propose to do. Loudon Dodd, in whom there is much of Louis Stevenson, says very truly in *The Wrecker*, that for the artist the external result is always a fizzle: his eyes are turned inward: 'he lives for a state of mind.' I mean to attempt the conjectural description of certain states of mind, with the books that were the 'external expression' of them. If for the artist his art is a fizzle, his life is often far more of a fizzle: it is even far more of a fiction. It is the one of his works in which he tells least of

the truth. Stevenson's was more real than most, because more romantic than most. But I prefer the romances, which were still more real. I mean that I think the wanderings of Balfour more Stevensonian than the wanderings of Stevenson: that the duel of Jekyll and Hyde is more illuminating than the quarrel of Stevenson and Henley: and that the true private life is to be sought not in Samoa but in Treasure Island; for where the treasure is, there is the heart also.

In short, I propose to review his books with illustrations from his life; rather than to write his life with illustrations from his books. And I do it deliberately, not because his life was not as interesting as any book; but because the habit of talking too much about his life has already actually led to thinking far too little of his literature. His ideas are being underrated, precisely because they are not being studied separately and seriously as ideas. His art is being underrated, precisely because he is not accorded even the fair advantages of Art for Art's Sake. There is indeed a queer irony about the fate of

the men of that age, who delighted in that axiom. They claimed judgement as artists, not men; and they are really remembered as men much more than they are remembered as artists. More men know the Whistlerian anecdotes than the Whistlerian etchings; and poor Wilde will live in history as immoral rather than unmoral. But there is a real reason for studying intrinsic intellectual values in the case of Stevenson; and it need not be said that exactly where the modern maxim would be useful, it is never used. The new criticism of Stevenson is still a criticism of Stevenson rather than of Stevenson's work; it is always a personal criticism, and often, I think, rather a spiteful criticism. It is simply nonsense, for instance, for a distinguished living novelist to suggest that Stevenson's correspondence is a thin stream of selfish soliloquy devoid of feeling for anybody but himself. It teems with lively expressions of longing for particular people and places; it breaks out everywhere with delight into that broad Scots idiom which, as Stevenson truly said elsewhere, gives

a special freedom to all the terms of affection. Stevenson might be lying, of course, though I know not why a busy author should lie at such length for nothing. But I cannot see how any man could say any more to suggest his dependence on the society of friends. These are positive facts of personality that can never be proved or disproved. I never knew Stevenson; but I knew very many of his favourite friends and correspondents. I knew Henry James and William Archer; I have still the honour of knowing Sir James Barrie and Sir Edmund Gosse. And anybody who knows them, even most slightly and superficially, must know they are not the men to be in confidential correspondence for years with a silly, greedy and exacting egoist without seeing through him; or to be bombarded with boring autobiographies without being bored. But it seems rather a pity that such critics should still be called upon to hunt up Stevenson's letter-bag, when they might well think it time to form some conclusions about Stevenson's place in letters. Anyhow, I propose on the present

occasion to be so perverse as to interest myself in literature when dealing with a literary man; and to be especially interested not only in the literature left by the man but in the philosophy inhering in the literature. And I am especially interested in a certain story, which was indeed the story of his life, but not exactly the story in his biography. It was an internal and spiritual story; and the stages of it are to be found rather in his stories than in his external acts. It is told much better in the difference between *Treasure Island* and *The Story of a Lie*, or in the difference between *A Child's Garden of Verses* and *Markheim* or *Olalla*, than in any detailed account of his wrangles with his father or the fragmentary love-affairs of his youth. For it seems to me that there is a moral to the art of Stevenson (if the shades of Wilde and Whistler will endure the challenge), and that it is one with a real bearing on the future of European culture and the hope that is to guide our children. Whether I shall be able to draw out this moral and make it sufficiently large

and clear, I know as little as the reader does.

Nevertheless, at this stage of the attempt I will say one thing. I have, in a sense, a sort of theory about Stevenson; a view of him which, right or wrong, concerns his life and work as a whole. But it is perhaps less exclusively personal than much of the interest that has been naturally taken in his personality. It is certainly the very contrary of the attacks which have commonly, and especially recently, been made on that personality. Thus the critics are fond of suggesting that he was nothing if not self-conscious; that the whole of his significance came from self-consciousness. I believe that the one really great and important work which he did for the world was done quite unconsciously. Many have blamed him for posing; some have blamed him for preaching. The matter which mainly interests me is not merely his pose, if it was a pose, but the large landscape or background against which he was posing; which he himself only partly realised, but which goes to make up a rather important

historical picture. And though it is true that he sometimes preached, and preached very well, I am by no means certain that the thing which he preached was the same as the thing which he taught. Or, to put it another way, the thing which he could teach was not quite so large as the thing which we can learn. Or again, many of them declare that he was only a nine days' wonder, a passing figure that happened to catch the eye and even affect the fashion; and that with that fashion he will be forgotten. I believe that the lesson of his life will only be seen after time has revealed the full meaning of all our present tendencies; I believe it will be seen from afar off like a vast plan or maze traced out on a hillside; perhaps traced by one who did not even see the plan while he was making the tracks. I believe that his travels and doublings and returns reveal an idea, and even a doctrine. Yet it was perhaps a doctrine in which he did not believe, or at any rate did not believe that he believed. In other words, I think his significance will stand out more strongly in relation to larger problems which are

beginning to press once more upon the mind of man; but of which many men are still largely unaware in our time, and were almost entirely unaware in his. But any contribution to the solution of those problems will be remembered; and he made a very great contribution, probably greater than he knew. Lastly, these same critics do not hesitate, in many cases, to accuse him flatly of being insincere. I should say that nobody, so openly fond of play-acting as he was, could possibly be insincere. But it is more to my purpose now to say that his relation to the huge half-truth that he carried was in its very simplicity a mark of truthfulness. For he had the splendid and ringing sincerity to testify, in a voice like a trumpet, to a truth that he did not understand.

# IN THE COUNTRY OF SKELT

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# CHAPTER II

## IN THE COUNTRY OF SKELT

EVERY now and then the eye is riveted, in reading current criticism, by some statement so astonishingly untrue, or even contrary to the fact, that it seems as if a man walking down the street were suddenly standing on his head. It is all the more noticeable when the critic really has a strong head to stand on. One of the ablest of the younger critics, whose studies in other subjects I have warmly admired, wrote in our invaluable *London Mercury* a study of Stevenson; or what purported to be a study of Stevenson. And the chief thing he said, indeed almost the only thing he said, was that the thought of Stevenson instantly throws us back to the greater example of Edgar Allan Poe; that both were pallid and graceful figures 'making wax flowers,' as somebody said; and of course the earlier and greater had the advantage of the later and the less. In fact, the critic

treated Stevenson as the shadow of Poe; which may not unfairly be called the shadow of a shade. He almost hinted that, for those who had read Poe, it was hardly worth while to read Stevenson. And indeed I could almost suspect he had taken his own advice; and never read a line of Stevenson in his life.

If a man were to say that Maeterlinck derives so directly from Dickens that it is difficult to draw the line between them, I should be momentarily at a loss to catch his meaning. If he were to say that Walt Whitman was so close a copyist of Pope that it is hardly worth while to read the copy, I should not at once seize the clue. But I should think these comparisons rather more close, if anything, than the comparison between Stevenson and Poe. Dickens did not confine himself to comic subjects so much as Poe did to tragic ones; and an Essay on Optimism might couple the names of Pope and Whitman. It might also include the name of Stevenson; but it would hardly beam and sparkle with the name of Poe. The contrast, however, is much deeper than

labels or the commonplaces of controversy. It is much deeper than formal divisions between what is funny and what is serious. It is concerned with something which it is now fashionable in drawing-rooms to call psychological; but which those who would as soon talk Latin as Greek still prefer to call spiritual. It is not necessarily what the newspapers would call moral; but that is only because it is more moral than most modern morality.

When Stevenson was known as Stennis, by Parisian art students struggling with his name, it was the hour of Art for Art's Sake. Painting was to be impersonal, though painters (like Whistler) were sometimes perhaps a little personal. But they all insisted that every picture is as impersonal as a pattern. They ought to have insisted that every pattern is as personal as a picture. Whether or no we see faces in the carpet, we ought to see a mind in the carpet; and in fact there is a mind in every scheme of ornament. There is as emphatically a morality expressed in Babylonian architecture or Baroque architecture as if it were plastered all over with

Biblical texts. Now in the same manner there is at the back of every artist's mind something like a pattern or a type of architecture. The original quality in any man of imagination is imagery. It is a thing like the landscapes of his dreams; the sort of world he would wish to make or in which he would wish to wander; the strange flora and fauna of his own secret planet; the *sort* of thing that he likes to think about. This general atmosphere, and pattern or structure of growth, governs all his creations however varied; and because he can in this sense create a world, he is in this sense a creator; the image of God. Now everybody knows what was in this sense the atmosphere and architecture of Poe. Dark wine, dying lamps, drugging odours, a sense of being stifled in curtains of black velvet, a substance which is at once utterly black and unfathomably soft, all carried with them a sense of indefinite and infinite decay. The word infinite is not itself used indefinitely. The point of Poe is that we feel that *everything* is decaying, including ourselves; faces are already growing

featureless like those of lepers; roof-trees are rotting from root to roof; one great grey fungus as vast as a forest is sucking up life rather than giving it forth; mirrored in stagnant pools like lakes of poison which yet fade without line or frontier into the swamp. The stars are not clean in his sight; but are rather more worlds made for worms. And this corruption is increased, by an intense imaginative genius, with the addition of a satin surface of luxury and even a terrible sort of comfort. 'Purple cushions that the lamplight gloated o'er' is in the spirit of his brother Baudelaire who wrote of *divans profonds comme les tombeaux*. This dark luxury has something almost liquid about it. Its laxity seems to be betraying more vividly how all these things are being sucked away from us, down a slow whirlpool more like a moving swamp. That is the atmosphere of Edgar Allan Poe; a sort of rich rottenness of decomposition, with something thick and narcotic in the very air. It is idle to describe what so darkly and magnificently describes itself. But perhaps the shortest and best

way of describing that artistic talent is to say that Stevenson's is exactly the opposite.

The first fact about the imagery of Stevenson is that all his images stand out in very sharp outline; and are, as it were, all edges. It is something in him that afterwards attracted him to the abrupt and angular black and white of woodcuts. It is to be seen from the first, in the way in which his eighteenth-century figures stand up against the skyline, with their cutlasses and cocked hats. The very words carry the sound and the significance. It is as if they were cut out with cutlasses; as was that unforgettable chip or wedge that was hacked by the blade of Billy Bones out of the wooden sign of the 'Admiral Benbow.' That sharp indentation of the wooden square remains as a sort of symbolic shape expressing Stevenson's type of literary attack; and if all the colours should fade from me and the scene of all that romance grow dark, I think that black wooden sign with a piece bitten out of it would be the last shape that I should see. It is no mere pun to say that

it is the best of his woodcuts. Normally, anyhow, the scene is the very reverse of dark, and certainly the very reverse of indefinite. Just as all the form can best be described as clean-cut, so all the colour is conspicuously clear and bright. That is why such figures are so often seen standing against the sea. Everybody who has been at the seaside has noted how sharp and highly coloured, like painted caricatures, appear even the most ordinary figures as they pass in profile to and fro against the blue dado of the sea. There is something also of that hard light that falls full and pale upon ships and open shores; and even more, it need not be said, of a certain salt and acrid clearness in the air. But it is notably the case in the outlines of these maritime figures. They are all edges and they stand by the sea, that is the edge of the world.

This is but a rough experimental method; but it will be found useful to make the experiment, of calling up all the Stevensonian scenes that recur most readily to the memory; and noting this bright hard quality in shape and hue. It will make

it seem all the stranger that any ornithologist could have confused the raven of Poe with the parrot of Long John Silver. The parrot was scarce more reputable; but he was a bird from the lands of bright plumage and blue skies, where the other bird was a mere shadow making darkness more dark. It is even worth noting that when the more modern pirates of *The Wrecker* carried away with them a caged bird, it had to be a canary. It is to be specially observed when Stevenson is dealing with things which many of his contemporaries made merely shadowy or unfathomably mysterious; such as the Highland hills and all the lost kingdoms of the Gael. His Highland tales have everything Scotch except Scotch mist. At that time, and even before, writers of the school of Fiona Macleod were already treating such peoples entirely as the Children of the Mist. But there is very little mist on the mountains of Stevenson. There is no Celtic twilight about his Celts. Alan Breck Stewart had no yearning for any delicate vapour to veil his bright silver buttons or his bright blue French coat.

There was hardly a cloud in the sky upon that day of doom, when Glenure dropped dead in the sunshine; and he did not have red hair for nothing. Stevenson is even moved to mention that the servant behind him was laden with lemons; because lemons are bright yellow. This sort of making of a picture may not be conscious, but it is none the less characteristic. Of course I do not mean literally that all the scenes in any novel could have the same scheme of colour, or occur at the same time of day. There are exceptions to the rule; but even these will generally be found to be exceptions that prove the rule. The time of *A Lodging for the Night* is not unnaturally at night; but even in that nightmare of winter in mediæval Paris the mind's eye is really filled rather with the whiteness of snow than the blackness of darkness. It is against the snow that we see the flaming mediæval figures; and especially that memorable figure who (like Campbell of Glenure) had no right to have red hair when he was dead. The hair is like a scarlet splash of blood crying for ven-

geance ; but I doubt whether the doomed gentleman in Poe's poetry would have been allowed to have red hair even when he was alive. In the same way, it would be easy to answer in detail, by finding some description of night in the works of Stevenson ; but it would never be the night that broods eternally on the works of Poe. It might be said, for instance, that there are few more vivid or typical scenes in the Stevensonian tales than that of the duel at midnight in *The Master of Ballantrae*. But there again the exception proves the rule ; the description insists not on the darkness of night but on the hardness of winter, the 'windless stricture of the frost' ; the candles that stand as straight as the swords ; the candle-flames that seem almost as cold as the stars. I have spoken of the double meaning of a woodcut ; this was surely, in the same double sense, a steel engraving. A steely cold stiffens and steadies that tingling play of steel ; and that not only materially but morally. The House of Durrisdeer does not fall after the fashion of The House of Ussher. There is in that murder-

ous scene I know not what that is clean and salt and sane; and, in spite of all, the white frost gives to the candles a sort of cold purification as of candlemas. But the point is, at the moment, that when we say this deed was done at night, we do not mean that it was done in the dark. There is a sense of exactitude and emphatic detail that belongs entirely to the day. Here indeed the two authors so strangely compared might almost have conspired in advance against the critic who compared them: as when Poe's ideal detective prefers to think in the dark, and therefore puts up the shutters even during the day. Dupin brings the outer darkness into the parlour, while Durie carries the candlelight into the forest.

These images are not fancies or accidents: their spirit runs through the whole scene. The same incident, for instance, shows all the author's love of sharp edges and cutting or piercing action. It is supremely typical that he made Mrs. Durie thrust the sword up to the hilt into the frozen ground. It is true that afterwards (perhaps under the sad eye of Mr.

Archer and the sensitive realists) he consented to withdraw this, as 'an exaggeration to stagger Hugo.' But it is much more significant that it did not originally stagger Stevenson. It was the very vital gesture of all his works that that sharp blade should cleave that stiff clay. It was true in many other senses, touching mortal clay and the sword of the spirit. But I am speaking now of the gesture of the craftsman, like that of a man cutting wood. This man had an appetite for cutting it clean. He never committed a murder without making a clean job of it.

Whence did that spirit come; and how did the story of it begin? That is the right and real way of beginning the story of Stevenson. If I say that it began with cutting figures out of cardboard, it might sound like a parody of the pedantic fancies about juvenile psychology and early education. But perhaps it will be better even to run the horrid risk of being mistaken for a modern educationist, rather than to repeat the too familiar phrases by which the admirer of Stevenson has got himself described as a senti-

mentalist. Too much has been talked in this connection about the Soul of the Child or the Peter Pan of Samoa; not because it is untrue, but because it is a mistake to tell a truth too often, so that it loses its freshness; especially when it is the truth about how to remain fresh. Many are perhaps rather tired of hearing about it; though they would never be tired of having it. I have therefore deliberately approached the matter by another road; and even by a road running backwards. Instead of talking first about Cummy and the nursery anecdotes of Master Louis (at the risk of making a really graceful figure grow ridiculous by mere repetition, in the eyes of multitudes of greatly inferior people) I have tried to take the stock and normal of his work first, and then note that it really does date in a special sense from his childhood; and that it is not sentimental and not senseless and not irrelevant to say so.

If therefore we ask, 'Where does the story of Stevenson really start; where does his special style or spirit begin and where do they come from; how did he

get, or begin to get, the thing that made him different from the man next-door?' I have no doubt about the answer. He got them from the mysterious Mr. Skelt of the Juvenile Drama, otherwise the toy theatre, which of all toys has most of the effect of magic on the mind. Or rather, of course, he got it from the way in which his own individual temper and talent grasped the nature of the game. He has written it all in an excellent essay and at least in one very real sentence of autobiography. 'What is the world, what is man and life but what my Skelt has made them?' The psychological interest is rather more special than is conveyed by the common generalisation about the imagination of infancy. It is not merely a question of children's toys; it is a question of a particular kind of toy, as of a particular kind of talent. It was not quite the same thing, for instance, to buy toy theatres in Edinburgh as it would have been to go to real theatres in London. In that little pasteboard play there might be something of the pantomime; but there was nothing of the

dissolving view. The positive outline of everything, so well sketched in his own essay, the hard favour of the heroine, the clumps of vegetation, the clouds rolled up stiff as bolsters—these things meant something to the soul of Stevenson by their very swollen solidity or angular swagger. And it is hardly an exaggeration to say that he spent his life in teaching the world what he had learnt from them. What he learnt from them was very much more than anybody else had ever learnt from them; and that is his teaching and his qualification to teach. But to the last he presented his morality in a series of Moral Emblems which had something in common with those definite outlines and defiant attitudes; and there was never any name for it but his own name of Skeltery.

It was because he loved to see on those lines, and to think in those terms, that all his instinctive images are clear and not cloudy; that he liked a gay patchwork of colour combined with a zigzag energy of action, as quick as the crooked lightning. He loved things to stand out; we might

say he loved them to stick out; as does the hilt of a sabre or the feather in a cap. He loved the pattern of crossed swords; he almost loved the pattern of the gallows because it is a clear shape like the cross. And the point is that this pattern still runs through or underneath all his more mature or complex writing; and is never lost even at the moments when he is really tragic or, what is worse, realistic. Even when he mourns as a man, he still rejoices as a child. The men in divers' helmets like monsters, in the sordid misery of *The Ebb-Tide*, are still like masks of pantomime goblins against the glowing azure. And James Durie is quite as clear, we might say quite as bright, in his black coat as Alan Breck in his blue one.

Taking such a toy as a type or symbol, we may well say that Stevenson lived inside his toy theatre. It is certain that he lived in an exceptional sense inside his own home; and often, I imagine, inside his own bedroom. It is here that there appears, thus early in his life, that other element that was destined to darken

it, often with something like the shadow of death. I know not how far that shadow could sometimes be traced upon the nursery wall. But it is certain that he was at least relatively a delicate or sickly child; and was therefore more thrown back upon that inner imaginative life than if he had been more robust in boyhood. The world inside that home was largely a world of his own; yes, even a world of his own imagining, a thing not so much of firelight as of pictures in the fire. The world outside his home was very different, even for those who shared his home life; and that is a contrast that I shall have occasion to emphasise, when we come to the crisis of his youth. It is enough to note here the paradox that he was to some extent protected by family life even from the heavier traditions of his family. As it did not build lighthouses in the garden pond, so it did not always bring the Kirk into the nursery. He has described how his stern Calvinistic grandfather tolerated in the nursery the wild Arabian fables that he might well have denounced in the pulpit. As even that

Edinburgh house defended him from the winter winds of Edinburgh, so it protected him in some degree from the full icy blasts of Puritanism which blew so high in public life. It may have been that he was a sick child; it may have been that he was a spoilt child; but this fact that he was largely left alone with his daydreams, dwelling in that house within a house which is typified by the toy theatre, is a thing to be remembered; for it means much at a later stage.

In this matter of what has been called the Child in R. L. S., I have admitted that there has been far too much talking; but there has been far too little thinking. The thing is a reality; and it does remain as a very considerable problem for the reason, as yet quite unsolved by the modern world, even when most is said about it. We have a mass of testimony from men of every description, from Treherne to Hazlitt, or from Wordsworth to Thackeray, to the psychological fact that the child experiences joys which glow like jewels even in retrospect. None of the normal naturalistic explanations explain that natural fact;

and some have suggested that it is indeed a supernatural fact. In the ordinary sense of mental growth, there is no more reason for the child being better than the man than for the tadpole being better than the frog. And the attempts to explain it by physical growth are even weaker. There is a good example of the weakness in one of the essays of Stevenson, who found himself, of course, at the particular modern moment to catch the first fashion and excitement of Darwinism. Speaking of the old Calvinist minister who confessed the gorgeous spell of the *Arabian Nights*, he suggests that in the brain of the theologian there is still the gambolling ape; the ancestor of man; 'probably arboreal.' It marks the security of such science, I may remark, that anthropologists are now saying that he was probably not arboreal. But anyhow, it is a little difficult to see why a man should love the complexity of labyrinthine cities, or wish to ride with the jewelled cohorts of the high princes of Arabia, merely because his relative had once been a hairy beast clambering like a bear on the top of a

branching pole. It reminds one of the glorious apology which Stevenson made for having expected that a wealthy man would know a Governor of Christ's Hospital : ' A man with a cold in his head does not necessarily know a rat-catcher ; and the connection, as it appears to my humbled and awakened sense, is equally close.'

The connection between the expanding energy of the young monkey and the secret daydreams of the young child is equally close. As a matter of fact, the time when the boy is most full of the energy of a monkey is emphatically not the time when the child is most full of the imaginative pleasures of a poet. These always come at a less vigorous period ; they very often come to a less vigorous person. They especially and notably did so in the case of Stevenson ; and it is absurd to explain the intensity of an infant who is an invalid by the bodily exuberance of a lad at the time when he is often rather a lout. Stevenson, with all the advantage of his disadvantages, may have lived through the period when everybody has a touch of loutishness. But that uncom-

fortable period of youth was not the period when the coloured pictures in his mind were most clear; they were much clearer later in the age of self-control and earlier in the age of innocence. The main point to be seized here is that they were coloured pictures of a particular kind. The colours faded, but in a certain sense the forms remained fixed; that is, that though they were slowly discoloured by the light of common day, yet when the lantern was again lit from within, the same magic-lantern slides glowed upon the blank screen. They were still pictures of pirates and red gold and bright blue sea, as they were in his childhood. And this fact is very important in the story of his mind; as we shall see when his mind reverted to them. For the time was to come when he was truly, like Jim Hawkins, to be rescued by a leering criminal with crutch and cutlass from destiny worse than death and men worse than Long John Silver—from the last phase of the enlightened nineteenth century and the leading thinkers of the age.

# YOUTH AND EDINBURGH

# CHAPTER III

## YOUTH AND EDINBURGH

It is the suggestion of this chapter that when Stevenson first stepped out of his early Edinburgh home, he slipped upon the step. It may have been nothing. worse, to begin with, than the ordinary butter-slide of the buffoonery of youth; such buffoonery as makes up the typical Edinburgh tale called *The Misadventures of John Nicholson*. But that tale alone would suggest that there was something a little greasy or even grimy about the butter. It is an odd story for Stevenson to have written; and no Stevensonian has any particular desire to dwell on those few of his works that might almost have been written by somebody else. But it has a biographical importance that has hardly been properly estimated, even in connection with this rather overworked biography. It is a curiously unlovely and uncomfortable comedy, not even uncomfortable enough to be a tragedy. The

hero is not only not heroic, but he is hardly more amusing than attractive; and the fun that is made of him is not only not genial, but is not particularly funny. It is strange that such misadventures should come from the mind that gave us the radiant harlequinade of *The Wrong Box*. But I mention it here because it is full of a certain atmosphere, into which Stevenson was plunged too abruptly, as I believe, when he passed from boyhood into youth. It is true to call it the atmosphere, or one of the atmospheres, of Edinburgh; yet it is the very reverse of so much that we rightly associate with the arid dignity of the Modern Athens. There is something very specially sordid and squalid in the glimpses of low life given in the dissipations of John Nicholson; and something of the same kind comes to us like a gust of gas from the medical students of *The Body Snatcher*. When I say that this first step of Stevenson led him rather abruptly astray, I do not mean that he did anything half so bad as multitudes of polite persons have done in the most polished

centres of civilisation. But I do mean that his city was not, in that particular aspect, very polite or polished or even particularly civilised. And I notice it because it has been noticed too little; and some other things have been noticed too much.

It is an obvious truth that Stevenson was born of a Puritan tradition, in a Presbyterian country, where still rolled the echoes, at least, of the theological thunders of Knox; and where the Sabbath was sometimes more like a day of death than a day of rest. It is easy, only too easy, to apply this by representing Stevenson's father as a stern old Covenanter who frowned down the gay talents of his son; and such a simplification stands out boldly in black and white. But like many other black and white statements, it is not true; it is not even fair. Old Mr. Stevenson was a Presbyterian and presumably a Puritan, but he was not a Pharisee; and he certainly did not need to be a Pharisee in order to condemn some parts of the conduct of his son. It is probably true that almost any other son might have

offended equally ; but it is also true that almost any other father would have been equally offended. The son would have been the last to pretend that the faults were all on one side ; the only thing that can concern posterity in the matter is in certain social conditions which gave to those faults a particular savour, which counted for something even when the faults themselves have been long left behind. And while people have written rather too much about the shadow of the Kirk and the restrictions of a Puritan society, there is something that has not been seen about what may be called the under-side of such a Puritan city. There is something strangely ugly and ungracious not merely about the virtues but about the vices, and especially the pleasures, of such a place. It can be felt, as I say, in Stevenson's own stories and in many other stories about Edinburgh. Blasts of raw whisky come to us on that raw wind : there is sometimes something shrill, like the skirl of the pipes, about Scottish laughter ; occasionally something very nearly insane about Scottish intoxication.

I will not connect it, as did a friend of mine, with the hypothesis that the heathen Scots originally worshipped demons; but it is probably connected with the same rather savage intensity which gave them their theological thoroughness. Anyhow, it is true that in such a world even temptation itself has something terrifying as well as tempting; and yet something at the same time undignified and flat. It was this that cut across the natural poetic adventure or ambition of a young poet; and gave to the early part of his story a quality of frustration, if not of aberration.

What was the matter with Stevenson, I fancy, in so far as there was ever anything much the matter with him, was that there was too sharp a contrast between the shelter and delicate fancies of his childhood and the sort of world which met him like the wind on the front doorstep. It was not merely the contrast between poetry and Puritanism; it was also the contrast between poetry and prose; and prose that was almost repulsively prosaic. He did not believe enough in

Puritanism to cling to it; but he did believe very much in a potential poetry of life, and he was bewildered by its apparently impossible position in the world of real living. And his national religion, even if he had believed in his religion as ardently as he believed in his nation, would never have met that particular point at issue.

Puritanism had no idea of purity. We might almost say that there is every other virtue in Puritanism except purity; often including continence, which is quite a different thing from purity. But it has not many images of positive innocence; of the things that are at once white and solid, like the white chalk or white wood which children love. This does not detract at all from the noble Puritan qualities: the republican simplicity, the fighting spirit, the thrift, the logic, the renunciation of luxuries, the resistance to tyrants, the energy and enterprise which have helped to give the Scot his adventurous advantage all over the world. But it is none the less true that there has been in his creed, at best, negative rather

than positive purity: the difference between the blank white window and the ivory tower. I know that a Victorian prejudice still regards this interpretation of history by theology as a piece of most distressing bad taste. I also know that this taboo on the main topic of mankind is becoming an intolerable nuisance; and preventing anybody, from the Papist to the atheist, from saying what he really thinks about the most real themes in the world. And I will take the liberty of stating, in spite of the taboo, that it is really relevant here to remember this Puritan defect. It is as much a fact that the Kirk of Stevenson's country had no cult of the Holy Child, no feast of the Holy Innocents, no tradition of the Little Brothers of St. Francis, nothing that could in any way *carry on* the childish enthusiasm for simple things, and link it up with a lifelong rule of life—this is as much a fact as that the Quakers are not a good military school or the good Moslem a good wine-taster. Hence it followed that when Stevenson left his home, he shut the door on a house lined with fairy gold, but

he came out on a frightful contrast; on temptations at once attractive and repulsive, and terrors that were still depressing even when they were disregarded. The boy in such surroundings is torn by something worse than the dilemma of Tannhäuser. He wonders why he is attracted by repellent things.

I will here make what is a mere guess in the dark; and in a very dark matter of the mind. But I suspect that it was originally out of this chasm of ugly division that there rose that two-headed monster, the mystery of Jekyll and Hyde. There is indeed one peculiarity about that grim grotesque which I have never seen noted anywhere; though I dare say it may have been noted more than once. It will be realised that I am not, alas, so close a student of Stevensoniana as many who seem to think much less of Stevenson. But it seems to me that the story of Jekyll and Hyde, which is presumably presented as happening in London, is all the time very unmistakably happening in Edinburgh. More than one of the characters seem to be pure Scots. Mr. Utterson, the lawyer, is

a most unmistakably Scottish lawyer, strictly occupied with Scots Law. No modern English lawyer ever read a book of dry divinity in the evening merely because it was Sunday. Mr. Hyde indeed possesses the cosmopolitan charm that unites all nations; but there is something decidedly Caledonian about Dr. Jekyll; and especially something that calls up that quality in Edinburgh that led an unkind observer (probably from Glasgow) to describe it as 'an east-windy, west-endy place.' The particular tone about his respectability, and the horror of mixing his reputation with mortal frailty, belongs to the upper middle classes in solid Puritan communities. But what is especially to the point of the present argument, there is a sense in which that Puritanism is expressed even more in Mr. Hyde than in Dr. Jekyll. The sense of the sudden stink of evil, the immediate invitation to step into stark filth, the abruptness of the alternative between that prim and proper pavement and that black and reeking gutter—all this, though doubtless involved in the logic of the tale, is far too frankly

and familiarly offered not to have had some basis in observation and reality. It is not thus that the ordinary young pagan, of warmer climes, conceives the alternative of Christ and Aphrodite. His imagination and half his mind are involved in defending the beauty and dignity of the joy of gods and men. It is not so that Stevenson himself came to talk of such things, when he had felt the shadow of old Athens fall on the pagan side of Paris. I allow for all the necessary horror of the conception of Hyde. But this dingy quality does not belong only to the demon antics of Hyde. It is implied, somehow, in every word about the furtive and embarrassed vices of Jekyll. It is the tragedy of a Puritan town; every bit as much as that black legend which Stevenson loved, in which the walking-stick of Major Weir went walking down the street all by itself. I hope to say something in a moment about the very deep and indeed very just and wise morality that is really involved in that ugly tale. I am only remarking here that the atmosphere and setting of it are those of some tale of stiff hypocrisy

in a rigid sect or provincial village; it might be a tale of the Middle West savagely dissected in the Spoon River Anthology. But the point about it is that the human beauty which makes sin most dangerous hardly appears by a hint; this Belial is never graceful or humane; and in this there seems to me to be something suggestive of the inverted order and ugly contrast with which licence presents itself in a world that has frowned on liberty. It is the utterance of somebody who, in the words of Kipling, knew the worst too young; not necessarily in his own act or by his own fault, but by the nature of a system which saw no difference between the worst and the moderately bad. But whatever form the shock of evil might take, I think it jerked him out of the right development of his romantic nature; and was responsible for much that seemed random or belated in his life.

I do not mean to imply that the morality of the story itself has anything of weakness or morbidity; my opinion is very much the other way. Though the fable may seem mad, the moral is very sane;

indeed, the moral is strictly orthodox. The trouble is that most of those who mention it do not know the moral, possibly because they have never read the fable. From time to time those anonymous authorities in the newspapers, who dismiss Stevenson with such languid grace, will say that there is something quite cheap and obvious about the idea that one man is really two men and can be divided into the evil and the good. Unfortunately for them, that does not happen to be the idea. The real stab of the story is not in the discovery that the one man is two men; but in the discovery that the two men are one man. After all the diverse wandering and warring of those two incompatible beings, there was still only one man born and only one man buried. Jekyll and Hyde have become a proverb and a joke; only it is a proverb read backwards and a joke that nobody really sees. But it might have occurred to the languid critics, as a part of the joke, that the tale is a tragedy; and that this is only another way of saying that the experiment was a failure. The point of the story is not that

a man *can* cut himself off from his conscience, but that he cannot. The surgical operation is fatal in the story. It is an amputation of which both the parts die. Jekyll, even in dying, declares the conclusion of the matter; that the load of man's moral struggle is bound upon him and cannot be thus escaped. The reason is that there can never be equality between the evil and the good. Jekyll and Hyde are not twin brothers. They are rather, as one of them truly remarks, like father and son. After all, Jekyll created Hyde; Hyde would never have created Jekyll; he only destroyed Jekyll. The notion is not so hackneyed as the critics find it, after Stevenson has found it for them thirty years ago. But Jekyll's claim is not that it is the first of such experiments in duality; but rather that it must be the last.

Nor do I necessarily admit the technical clumsiness which some have alleged against the tale, merely because I believe that [many of its emotions were first experienced in the crude pain of youth. Some have gone into particular detail in

order to pick it to pieces; and Mr. E. F. Benson has made the (to me) strange remark that the structure of the story breaks down when Jekyll discovers that his chemical combination was partly accidental and is therefore unrecoverable. The critic says scornfully that it would have done just as well if Jekyll had taken a blue pill. It seems to me odd that any one who seems to know so much about the devil as the author of *Colin* should fail to recognise the cloven hoof in the cloven spirit called up by the Jekyll experiment. That moment in which Jekyll finds his own formula fail him, through an accident he had never foreseen, is simply the supreme moment in every story of a man buying power from hell; the moment when he finds the flaw in the deed. Such a moment comes to Macbeth and Faustus and a hundred others; and the whole point of it is that nothing is really secure, least of all a Satanist security. The moral is that the devil is a liar, and more especially a traitor; that he is more dangerous to his friends than his foes; and, with all

deference to Mr. Benson, it is not a shallow or unimportant moral. But although the story ultimately emerged as a gargoyle very carefully graven by a mature master-craftsman, and was moreover a gargoyle of the greatest spiritual edification, eminently suited to be stuck on to the most sacred edifice, my point for the moment is that the stone of which it was made was originally found, I think, by Stevenson as a boy, kicking about the street, not to mention the gutter. In other words, he did not need to leave the respectable metropolis of the north to find the weaknesses of Jekyll and the crimes of Hyde.

I deal with these things in general terms, not merely out of delicacy, but partly out of something that I might almost call impatience or contempt. For the quarrels between the Victorian whitewashers and the Post-Victorian mudslingers seem to me deficient in the ordinary decent comprehension of the difficulties of human nature. Both the scandalised and the scandalmonger seem to me to look very silly beside the sensible person in the

Bible, who confined himself to saying that there are things that no man knows, such as the way of a bird in the air and the way of a man in his youth. That Stevenson was in the mature and sane sense a good man is certain, without any Victorian apologetics; that he never did anything that he thought wrong is improbable, even without any elaborate cloacan researches; and the whole thing is further falsified by the fact that, outside a certain religious tradition, very few either of the whitewashers or the mudslingers really believe in the morality involved. The former seek to save nothing better than respectability; the latter even when they slander can hardly condemn. Stevenson was not a Catholic; he did not pretend to have remained a Puritan; but he was a highly honourable, responsible and chivalrous Pagan, in a world of Pagans who were most of them considerably less conspicuous for chivalry and honour. I for one, if I may say so, am ready to defend my own standards or to judge other men by theirs. But the Victorian pretence that every well-dressed

hero of romance with over five hundred a year is born immune from the temptations which the mightiest saints have rolled themselves in brambles to control—that does not concern me and I shall not discuss it again.

But what does concern me, at this particular stage of the story, is not the question of what Stevenson thought right or wrong when he had become consciously and consistently a Pagan, but the particular way in which right and wrong appeared to him at this crude and groping age when he was still by tradition a Puritan. And I do think there was something tail-foremost, to use one of his own favourite words, in the way in which evil crept into his existence, as it does into everybody else's. He saw the tail of the devil before he saw his horns. Puritanism gave him the key rather to the cellars than the halls of Babylon; and something thus subterranean, suffocating and debased rolls like a smoke over the story of Jekyll and Hyde. But I only mention these matters as part of a general unfolding of his mind and moral nature, which

seems to me to have had a great deal to do with the later development of his destiny. The normal, or at least the ideal, development of a man's destiny is from the coloured chamber of childhood to an even more romantic garden of the faith and tryst of youth. It is from the child's garden of verses to the man's garden of vows. I do not think that time of transition went right with Stevenson; I think that something thwarted or misled him; I think it was then that the east wind of Edinburgh Puritanism blew him out of his course, so that he returned only long after to anything like a secure loyalty and a right human relation. In a word, I think that in his childhood he had the best luck in the world, and in his youth the worst luck in the world; and that this explains most of his story.

Anyhow, he found no foothold on those steep streets of his beautiful and precipitous city; and as he looked forth over the litter of little islands in the large and shining estuary, he may have had some foreshadowing of that almost vagabond destiny which ended in the ends of

the earth. There seemed in one sense no social reason why it should not end in Edinburgh as it had begun in Edinburgh. There seemed nothing against a normal successful career for one so brilliant, so graceful and essentially so humane; his story might have been as comfortable as a Victorian three-volume novel. He might have had the luck to marry an Edinburgh lady as delightful and satisfactory as Barbara Grant. He might have presided over the revels of a new bunch of Stevensons, coming home from Leith Walk laden with the gay portfolios of Skelt. They also might have bought Penny Pickwicks or gone about girt with lanterns; and his own view of these things might have altered, though not necessarily weakened, with the responsibility of one who sees them reproduced in others. But among these early Edinburgh pranks, which he has left on record, was one which is something of a symbol. He speaks somewhere of a special sort of apples which he gathered by the seashore, which were such as might well be gathered from the salted and crooked trees that grow

by the sea. I do not know what it was; or what form it took; or whether it ever took any definable form at all. But somehow or other, in thought or word or deed, in that bleak place he ate the apple of knowledge; and it was a crab apple.

I think it was partly the pains of youth that afterwards made so vivid to him the pleasures of childhood. The break in his life was of course partly due to the break in his health. But it was also due, I think, to something ragged and unseemly in the edge of life he laid hold of when he touched the hem of her garment; to something unsatisfactory in all that side of existence as it appears accidentally to the child of Puritan conventions. The effect on him was that, during those years, he grew up too much out of touch with his domestic and civic, if not his national traditions; knowing at once too much and too little. He was never denationalised; for he was a Scotsman; and a Scotsman never is, even when he is in theory internationalised. But he did begin to become internationalised, in

the sense that he gained a sort of indiscriminate intimacy with the culture of the world, especially the rather cynical sort of culture which was then current. The local and domestic conventions, which were in many ways wrong, lost their power to control him even when they were right. And in all that retrospect nothing remained so real as the unreal romances of the first days. In the Puritan creeds there was nothing that he could believe, even as much as he had believed in make-believe. There was nothing to call him back half so clearly as the call of that childish rhyme of which he afterwards wrote, in the touching dedication that has the burden, 'How far is it to Babylon?' Unfortunately it is not very far to Babylon. That cosmopolitan market of the arts, which is in his story perhaps best represented by Paris, called to him more and more to live the life of the complete artist, which in those days had something like a touch of the complete anarchist. He passed into it, ultimately in person and already in spirit; there was nothing to call him

back but the thin and tiny cry of a tin trumpet; that sounded once and was mute.

I say there was nothing to call him back; and very little to restrain him; and to any one who really understands the psychology and philosophy of that time of transition, it is really rather a wonder that he was so restrained. All his after adventures will be misunderstood if we do not realise that he left behind him a dead religion. Men are misled by the fact that he often used the old national creed as a subject; which really means rather that it had become an object. It was a subject that had ceased to be subjective; he worked upon it and not with it. He and the inheritors of his admirable tradition, like Barrie and Buchan, treated that national secret genially and even tenderly; but their very tenderness was the first soft signal that the thing was dead. At least they would never have so fondled the tiger-cat of Calvinism until, for them, its teeth were drawn. Indeed this was the irony and the pathos of the position of Scottish Calvinism: to be rammed

down people's throats for three hundred years as an unanswerable argument and then to be inherited at the last as an almost indefensible affection; to be expounded to boys with a scowl and remembered by men with a smile; to crush down all human sentiments and to linger at last in the sentimental comedy of Thrums. All that long agony of lucidity and masterful logic ended at last suddenly with a laugh; and the laugh was Robert Louis Stevenson. With him the break had come; and it follows that something in himself was broken. The whaups were crying round the graves of the martyrs, and his heart remembered, but not his mind; great Knox blew thrice upon the trumpet, and what thrilled him were no words but a noise; Old Mortality seemed still to be tinkering on his eternal round to preserve the memorials of the Covenant, but a bell had already tolled to announce that even Old Mortality was mortal. When Stevenson stepped into the wider world of the Continent, with its more graceful logic and even its more graceful vice, he went as one emptied of all the

ethics and metaphysics of his home, and open to all the views and vices of a rationalistic civilisation. All the deeper lessons of his early life must have seemed to him to be dead within him; nor did he himself know what thing within him was yet alive.

# THE REACTION TO ROMANCE

# CHAPTER IV

## THE REACTION TO ROMANCE

WHEN a man walks down the street with a very long feather stuck in his hat and streaming behind him, or carrying a gold-hilted rapier cocked at a gallant angle, there are some among the typists and clerks of Clapham Junction shrewd enough to perceive that there is something faintly ostentatious about him. And when a man walks down Piccadilly or the parade at Bournemouth with long hair streaming behind him and surmounted by an embroidered smoking-cap, there are not wanting critics so acute as to deduce (with all the detailed shrewdness of Sherlock Holmes) that such a man is not entirely averse from being looked at. Many long and laborious studies of Stevenson have been published lately, to fortify and establish this remarkable result; and I need not devote myself to proving it further. Let us record with all due solemnity that Robert Louis Stevenson

has been convicted by the court of being very vain, if 'dressing up' in the manner of a child, and not resenting the consequent conspicuous position, be the marks of vanity. But there is one aspect of this truth which seems to me to have been strangely and even astonishingly overlooked. Everybody talks as if Stevenson had been not only conspicuous but quite unique in this sort of vanity. Everybody seems to assume that among the artists of his time he was entirely alone in his affectation. Contrasting in this respect with the humdrum respectability of Oscar Wilde, notable as the very reverse of the evangelical meekness of Jimmy Whistler, standing out as he does against the stodgy chapel-going piety of Max Beerbohm, having none of the cheery commonplaces of Aubrey Beardsley or the prosaic self-effacement of Richard Le Gallienne, he naturally aroused attention by the slightest deviation into oddity or dandyism; things notoriously so unpopular among the decadents of the 'nineties. Among other things, everybody seems to have forgotten that Stevenson lived for some time among

the Parisian art students; who have never been remarkable for the bourgeois regularity of their coats and hats. Yet he actually mentions the offensive smoking-cap himself as originating in the Bohemian masquerade of the Quartier Latin. There he was not so much being eccentric as being conventional; for the convention was unconventionality. A mob of men in that place, and at that age, would have played the same sort of tricks and worn the same kind of clothes; nor was Stevenson, as I have said, the only one of them who carried these attitudes and antics through life. Any one of them might have worn a smoking-cap; none of them would have objected to any variety of fool's cap, though they hardly wished it identified with a dunce's cap. Many of them, still alive, would cheerfully admit that the cap fits. But poor Stevenson is to be remembered as a fool, because all the fools are forgotten except Stevenson.

It was not that sort of oddity that was really odd. The costume for which he is now conspicuous was really part of a carnival. The attitude in which he stands,

to the astonishment and grief of the critics, was really the fashion of a crowd. But what was really individual and interesting about him was the way in which he did actually react against the surroundings; the point at which he refused to run with the crowd or follow the fashion. No insanity in that cheerful lunatic asylum is so interesting to the psychologist as the shock of Stevenson going sane. No romantic ruffianism in which he may or may not have indulged is so curious as the real spirit of his revolt into respectability."

"*Treasure Island*, if hardly a historical novel, was essentially a historical event. The rise or revolt of R. L. S. must be taken in relation to history, to the history of the whole European mind and mood. It was, first and last, a reaction against pessimism. There was thrown across all that earth and sky the gigantic shadow of Schopenhauer. At least it seemed gigantic then, though some of us may already have suspected that the shadow was larger than the man. Anyhow, in that period we might almost say that pessimism was

another name for culture. Cheerfulness was associated with the Philistine, like the broad grin with the bumpkin. Pessimism could be read between the lines of the lightest triolet or most elegant essay. Any one who really remembers that time will admit that the world was much more hopeful after the worst of its wars than it was not long before. Mr. H. G. Wells, whose genius had just been discovered by Henley, was very much older than he is now. He was prophesying that the outline of history would end, not in communism, but in cannibalism. He was prophesying the end of the world: a crack of doom not even cheerful enough to be a day of judgement. Oscar Wilde, who perhaps filled up more room, both in mind and body, than anybody else on that stage at that moment, expressed his philosophy in that bitter parable in which Christ seeks to comfort a man weeping and is answered, 'Lord, I was dead and you raised me to life; what else can I do but weep?'

This was the spirit that was behind all that levity; a levity that was like fire-

works in more ways than one. We talk of some Whistlerian satire as a squib; but squibs can only shine in the dark. It is all the difference between the colours of fireworks that have their backs to the vault of night and the colours of church windows that have their backs to the sun. For these people all the light of life was in the foreground; there was nothing in the background but an abyss. They were rather nihilists than atheists; for there is a difference between worshipping Nothing and not worshipping anything. Now the interest of the next stage of Stevenson is that he stood up suddenly amid all these things and shook himself with a sort of impatient sanity; a shrug of scepticism about scepticism. His real distinction is that he had the sense to see that there is nothing to be done with Nothing. He saw that in that staggering universe it was absolutely necessary to stand somehow on something; and instead of falling about anyhow with all the other lunatics, he did seek for a ledge on which he could really stand. He did definitely and even dramatically refuse to go mad; or, what

is very much worse, to remain futile. But the whole turning-point of the tale is now missed; partly by the too concentrated idolatry of the sentimentalists, and partly by the too concentrated spite of the iconoclasts. They miss the *historic* relation of the man to his time and school. It was one of the crowd of artists who showed mutinous signs of deserting art for life. It was even one of the decadents who refused to decay.

Now what really remains interesting in this story of Stevenson, in spite of all the vain repetitions, is the authority to which he appealed. It was rather an odd one; and many would have said that his sanity was madder than madness. He did not appeal to any ideal of the sort usually pursued by idealists; he did not try to construct an optimist philosophy like Spinoza or Emerson; he did not preach a good time coming like William Morris or Wells; he did not appeal to Imperialism or Socialism or Scotland: he appealed to Skelt.

Familiarity had dulled the divine paradox that we should learn morality from little children. He advanced the more

disturbing paradox that we should learn morality from little boys. The young child who should lead us was the common (or garden) little boy: the boy of the catapult and the toy pistol—and the toy theatre. Stevenson seemed to say to the semi-suicides drooping round him at the café tables; drinking absinthe and discussing atheism: 'Hang it all, the hero of a penny-dreadful play was a better man than you are! A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured was an art more worthy of living men than the art that you are all professing. Painting pasteboard figures of pirates and admirals was better worth doing than all this; it was fun; it was fighting; it was a life and a lark; and if I can't do anything else, dang me but I will try to do that again!' So was presented to the world this entertaining spectacle; of the art student surrounded by easels on which other artists were debating the fine shades of Corot and Renoir, while he himself was gravely painting mariners a bright prussian blue out of a shilling paint-box and shedding their blood in streams of

unmistakable crimson lake. That is the primary paradox about Stevenson's early manhood; or, if you will, the real joke about Stevenson. Of all that intellectualism in Bohemia the result was the return to Skelt. Of all that wallowing in Balzac the remarkable outcome was *Treasure Island*. But it is no exaggeration to say that it had still more to do with toys than treasures. Stevenson was not really looking forward or outward to a world of larger things, but backward and inward into a world of smaller ones: in the peepshow of Skelt, which was still the true window of the world.

Thus, Skelt and his puppets seemed made for a repartee to the favourite phrases of the pessimists. All that world was haunted as with a melody by the hedonist despair of Fitzgerald's Omar: one of the great historical documents of this history. No image could make them bow their heads with more hopelessness and helplessness of despair than that famous one:

> 'We are none other than a moving row
> Of magic shadow-shapes that come and go
> Around the sun-illumined lantern held
> At midnight by the Master of the show.'

And no image could make the infant Stevenson kick his little legs with keener joy. His answer, in effect, to the philosophy of the magic shadow-shapes, was that the shadow-shapes really were magic. At any rate, they really did seem to the children to be magic: and it was not false but true psychology to call the thing 'a magic lantern.' He was capable of feeling passionate delight in being such a Lantern-Bearer. He was capable even of feeling passionate delight in being such a shadow. And any one who has seen a shadow pantomime as a child, as I have, and who has retained any living link with his own childhood, will realise that Omar was as unlucky in his commentary on the lantern-show as the delightful curate in *Voces Populi* who talked about Valentine and Orson. He was teaching optimism as an illustration to pessimism. Later we may make a guess at the nature of this glamour about such tricks or toys; the point for the moment is that they were associated with gloom in philosophy, while they were associated with pleasure in psychology.

The same applies to more common examples of the fancies of the fatalist. When the sage said that men are 'only puppets,' it must have seemed to the young Louis almost like the blasphemy of saying they were 'only pirates.' It might well seem to any child like saying that they were only fairies. There was something weak about bewailing drearily the fate of the puppets of destiny, to an audience that was eagerly awaiting the joyful apocalypse of a puppet-show. The Stevensonian reaction might be roughly represented by the suggestion—if we are as futile as puppets, is there anything particular to prevent our being as entertaining as Punch? And there is, as I say, a real spiritual mystery behind this mystical ecstasy of mimicry. If living dolls were so dull and dead, why in the world were dead dolls so very much alive? And if being a puppet is so depressing, how is it that the puppet of a puppet can be so enthralling?

It is to be noted that this sort of romanticism, as compared with realism, is *not* more superficial, but on the contrary

more fundamental. It is an appeal from what is experienced to what is felt. When people are avowedly talking about happiness and unhappiness, as the pessimists were, it is futile to say that shadows and sham pasteboard figures *ought* not to make people happy. It was futile to tell the young Stevenson that the toy-theatre shop was a dingy booth stocked with dusty rolls of paper, covered with ill-drawn and ungainly figures; and to insist that these were the only facts. He naturally answered: 'My facts were my feelings; and what do you make of those facts? Either there is something in Skelt; which you do not admit. Or else there is something in Life; which you also do not admit.' Hence arose that answer to the realists which is best expressed in the essay called *The Lantern-Bearers*. The realists, who overlook so many details, have never quite noticed where lay the falsity of their method; it lay in the fact that so long as it was materialistic, it could not really be realistic. For it could not be psychological. If toys and trifles can make people happy,

that happiness is not a trifle and certainly cannot be a trick.

This is the point that has been missed in all the talk about posing. Those who repeat for the hundredth time that he posed, have not got as far as the obvious question, 'Posed as what?' All the other poets and artists posed; but they posed as the members of the Suicide Club. He posed as Prince Florizel with a sword, challenging the President of the Suicide Club. He was, if you will, the foolish masker I have imagined, tricked out with a feather and a sword or dagger; but not tricked out more extravagantly than those who appeared as fantastic figures at their own funeral. If he had a feather, it was not a white feather; if he had a dagger, it was not a poisoned dagger or the pessimist dagger that is turned inwards; in short, if he had a posture it was a posture of defence and even of defiance. And it was, after all, the fashionable posture of his time which he set himself to defy. And it is here that it is really relevant to remember that he was not altogether posturing when he

said he was defying death. Death was much nearer to him than it was to the pessimists; and he knew it whenever he coughed and found blood on his handkerchief. He was not pretending to defy it half so much as they were pretending to seek it. It is no very unreasonable claim for him that he made a better use of his bad health than Oscar Wilde made of his good health; and nothing affected in the externals of either can alter the contrast. The dagger may have been theatrical; but the blood was real. As Cyrano said of his friend, 'Le sang, c'est le sien.' And it really was the absence of courage in the current culture that awoke his protest or pose. In any case, the intellectual fine shades were morally more than a little shady. But he hated chiefly the loss of what soldiers call morale rather than what parsons call morality. All that world cowered under the shadow of death. All alike were travelling under the flag of the skull and crossbones. But he alone could call it the Jolly Roger.

What is really not appreciated about Stevenson is the abruptness of this break-

away. We talk of looking back with gratitude to innovators or the introducers of new ideas; but in fact nothing is more difficult to do, since for us they are now necessarily old ideas. There is only one moment, at most, of triumph for the original thinker; while his thought is an originality and before it becomes merely an origin. News spreads quickly; that is, it grows stale quickly; and though we may call a work wonderful, we cannot easily put ourselves in the position of those for whom it was a cause of wonder, in the sense of surprise. Between the first fashion of talking too much in praise of Stevenson, and the newer fashion of talking nonsense in disparagement of Stevenson, we have become quite familiar with the association of certain ideas; of extreme stylistic polish applied to rough schoolboy adventure, of the Penny Plain figure tinted as carefully as a miniature. But these ideas were not always associated in the way in which Stevenson associated them. We may tear the combination to pieces, but it was he who wove it together; and —as many would have thought—of very

incongruous threads. It really did seem preposterous to many that a serious literary artist of the age of Pater should devote himself to rewriting Penny Dreadfuls. It was just as if George Meredith had chosen to put all his fine feminine psychology into writing the sort of twopenny novelettes that were read by housemaids, and called 'Pansy's Elopement' or 'Winnie's Wedding Bells.' It was as if Henry James had been heard to say or, so to speak, to suggest, that there was, after all, and in a way quite annoyingly overlooked, *something*—something that really should have been better evaluated and re-expressed, as it were, in all that really unquestionable productiveness of *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*. It was as if Paderewski had insisted on only going round with a barrel-organ; or Whistler had confined himself solely to painting public-house signs. A distinguished dramatist, who is old enough to remember in his youth the first successes of Stevenson's manhood, told me how absurd it seemed at the time that any one should take seriously such gutter literature of the *gamin*. A book written only for

boys generally meant a book written only for errand-boys. It seemed a strange association of ideas that it should be written carefully as a book for men, and even for literary men. It does not seem so strange now; because Stevenson has done it quite a long time ago. But it is important to realise that not everybody thought it natural to expend the style of *Pulvis Et Umbra* on the equivalent of 'Dick Deadshot Among the Pirates.' It was the very last sort of enthusiasm that would have easily carried any of his cultivated contemporaries off their feet. The typical literary man, with the outlook and philosophy of that generation, would have been about as likely to pass his life in throwing paper darts or chalking caricatures of his publisher on a blackboard.

Thus, there is one of those phrases quoted too much, as against so many quoted too little, that he and his artistic friends bore with them bulky yellow volumes 'quite impudently French.' But, by the tests of that artistic world, *Treasure Island* is quite impudently English. By the conventions of that world, there was

nothing unconventional about studying Balzac or being Bohemian. It was much more unconventional to study Captain Marryat and to write about the good captain who flew the Union Jack over the stockade, in defiance of the bad buccaneers. From the standpoint of Art in those days, even that flag was a much too Moral Emblem. It is only when we understand what there was that seemed quaint and even undignified in his adventurous antic, that we can clearly understand the unconscious truths that lay behind it. For, as against the black flag of pessimism, his flag really was a Moral Emblem. There was a morality in his reaction into adventure; his appeal to the spirit of the highway—though it were sometimes the spirit of the highwayman.

In other words, he appealed to his own childhood. A tale is told of it: that when some one chaffed him about a toy sword he replied solemnly, 'The hilt is of gold and the scabbard of silver and the child is well content.' It was to that moment that he suddenly returned. Groping for something that would satisfy, he found nothing so

solid as that fancy. That had not been Nothing; that had not been pessimistic; that was not a life over which Lazarus could do nothing but weep. That was as positive as the paints in the paint-box and the difference between vermilion and crome yellow. Its pleasures had been as solid as the taste of sweets; and it was nonsense to say that there had been nothing in them worth living for. Play at least is always serious. So long as we can say, 'Let us pretend,' we must be sincere. Therefore he appealed across the void or valley of his somewhat sterile youth to that garden of childhood, which he had once known and which was his nearest notion of paradise. There were no shrines in the faith or in the city of his fathers; there were no channels of consecration or confession; there was no imagery save in the faceless images left behind by the image-breakers. A man in his mood of reaction towards happiness might almost as well have prayed to the Black Man who figured as the Scottish provincial devil as to the God behind the black cloud that sent out such stiff

horrific rays in the Calvinist family Bible. But in all that waste of Scottish moorland, the sun still glowed on that square of garden like a patch of gold. The lessons were lost, but the toys were eternal; the men had been harsh, but the child had been well content; if there were nothing better, he would return.

In the elementary philosophy of the thing, of course, what moved Stevenson was what moved Wordsworth; the unanswerable fact of that first vividness in the vision of life. But he had it in his own quaint way; and it was hardly the vision of meadow, grove and stream. It was rather the vision of coffin, gallows and gory sabre that were apparelled in celestial light, the glory and the freshness of a dream. But he was appealing to a sort of sanguinary innocence against a sort of silent and secretive perversion. Here, as everywhere in this rude outline, I am taking a thing like *Treasure Island* in a spirit of simplification and symbol. I do not mean, of course, that he wrote *Treasure Island* sitting in a café on the boulevards; any more than I mean that he wrote

*Jekyll and Hyde* in a cellar or a garret in the lands of the Cowgate. Both these books were developed by stages of the greatest literary care, in later life; and pursued with the characteristic consistency of his art through all the equally characteristic mutability of his domicile. When I say that a certain book came out of a certain experience, I mean that he drew on that experience to write it, or that it was the ultimate result of the reaction which that experience produced in his mind. And I mean in this case that what shaped and sharpened Stevenson's memory of the mere nonsense of Skeltery was his growing sense of the need of some escape from the suffocating cynicism of the mass of men and artists in his time. He wished to go back to that nonsense; for it seemed, by comparison, quite sensible.

*Treasure Island* was written as a boy's book; perhaps it is not always read as a boy's book. I sometimes fancy that a real boy could read it better if he could read it backwards. The end, which is full of skeletons and ancient crime, is in the fullest sense beautiful; it is even

idealistic. For it is the realisation of an ideal, that which is promised in its provocative and beckoning map; a vision not only of white skeletons but also green palm trees and sapphire seas. But the beginning of the book, considered as a boy's book, can hardly be called idealistic; and is found in practice to be rather too realistic. I may make an egotistical confession here, which I think is not unique and not without its universal inference about the spirit of youth. When I read the book as a child, I was not horrified by what are called the horrors. Something did indeed shock me, just a little more than a child should be shocked; for of course he would have no fun if he were never shocked at all. But what shook me was not the dead man's chest or the live man's crimes or the information that 'Drink and the devil have done for the rest'; all that seemed to me quite cheery and comforting. What did seem to me ugly was exactly what might happen in any inn-parlour, if there were no pirates in the world. It was that business about apoplexy; or some sort of alcoholic

poisoning. It was the sailor having a mysterious thing called a stroke; so much more terrifying than any sabre-stroke. I was ready to wade in seas of gore; for all that gore was crimson lake; and indeed I always imagined it as a lake of crimson. Exactly what I was not ready for were those few drops of blood drawn from the arm of the insensible sailor, when he was bled by the surgeon. That blood is not crimson lake. Thus we have the paradox that I was horrified by the act of healing; while all the rowdy business of hitting and hurting did not hurt me at all. I was disgusted with an act of mercy, because it took the form of medicine. I will not pause to draw the many morals of this paradox; especially in relation to a common fallacy of pacifism. I will content myself with saying, whether I make my meaning clear or no, that a child is not wicked enough to disapprove of war.

But whatever be the case with most boys, there was certainly one boy who enjoyed *Treasure Island*; and his name was Robert Louis Stevenson. He really

had very much of the feeling of one who had got away to great waters and outlandish lands; perhaps even more vividly than he had it later, when he made that voyage not metaphorically but materially, and found his own Treasure Island in the South Seas. But just as in the second case he was fleeing to clear skies from unhealthy climates, so he was in reviving the adventure story escaping from an exceedingly unhealthy climate. The microbe of morbidity may have been within him, as well as the germ of phthisis; but in the cities he had left behind pessimism was raging like a pestilence. Multitudes of pale-faced poets, formless and forgotten, sat crowded at those café tables like ghosts in Hades, worshipping 'la sorcière glauque,' like that one of them whose mortality has been immortalised by Max. It is too often forgotten that if Stevenson had really been only a pale young man making wax flowers, he would have found plenty of pale young men to make them with him; and the flowers and flower-makers would long have withered together. But he alone

escaped, as from a city of the dead; he cut the painter as Jim Hawkins stole the boat, and went on his own voyage, following the sun. Drink and the devil have done for the rest, especially the devil; but then they were drinking absinthe and not with a 'Yo ho ho'; consuming it without the most feeble attempt at any 'Yo ho ho'—a defect which was, of course, the most serious and important part of the affair. For 'Yo ho ho' was precisely what Stevenson, with his exact choice of words, particularly desired to say just then. It was for the present his most articulate message to mankind.

Mrs. Margaret

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# THE SCOTTISH STORIES

# CHAPTER V

## THE SCOTTISH STORIES

PROVERBS are generally true, when they are the proverbs of the people; so long as they are not proverbs about another people. It was unwise to search Sussex to discover if Kentish men had tails, or England to learn if French husbands had horns. And obviously there is much that is misleading in the traditional type of the practical Puritanical Scotsman, with his dry thrift and bleak respectability. A figure of such severe decorum is not very vividly evoked either by the title of Rab the Ranter or the Wizard of the North. And few of our own generation are yet convinced of it, even by the scientific severity that has given us *Peter Pan* or the sober responsibility that stiffens the narrative of *The New Arabian Nights*. The readers of the latter work will be much interested to realise that a Scotsman is incapable of seeing a joke, since he seems so eminently capable of making

one; and the reader of the former will be disposed to suggest that the national jesting is not too sober but rather too extravagant. *Peter Pan* carries on by lineal tradition the cult of the child, beginning with *Treasure Island*; but if there be anything to criticise in Sir James Barrie's beautiful fantasia, it is that wilder things happen to Wendy in a London nursery than ever happened to Jim in a tropical island. The only objection to living in a nursery where the dog is the nurse, or the father lives in the dog-kennel, is that there seems no necessity to go to the Never-Never Land to look for the things that never happen. Whatever else we say of the Scottish genius, it is certainly not merely dry or prosaic; and indeed the real mixture of the Scottish genius is as full of contradictions as that pattern of crosses in the Scottish plaid. And even here there is subtlety as well as cross-purposes; and the tartan may be an old tribal form of camouflage.

There is an aspect of a Scottish hill or moor, which for the moment will look grey and at the least change of light look

purple; which is in itself an image of Scotland. A passing from the most dispassionate to the most passionate tint, which yet seems to be no more than a new shade, might well represent the mixture of restraint and violence that runs through the national history and the national character. Stevenson stands for one of those moments in the national history when the grey turned to purple; and yet in his purple there is still a great deal of grey. There is a great deal of restraint, artistic even more than moral; there is a certain coolness in the commentary even on picturesque objects; there is even a certain absence of the common conception of passion. There are shades even in purple; there are differences between the purple orchid and the purple heather; and his often seems to be like white heather, for luck. In other words, his idea of happiness is still of the breezy and boyish sort; and though he described the happiness of lovers very happily in *Catriona* and began to foreshadow their unhappiness in *Weir of Hermiston*, he attacked the theme rela-

tively late in life; and it counted for little in that original idea of a return to simplicity, which had come upon him like a wind from a playground. Imagine how annoyed Jim Hawkins would have been, if a lot of girls had been allowed to muck up the business of going after treasure! So brilliant is this resurrection of boyhood, that we almost believe for the moment that Stevenson must have been as young and callous as Jim. Only I suspect, as I say, that in some ways he had even made himself a little callous in those matters. There his adventures had been mis-adventures. He did not recall for mere pleasure the memory of youth, as he did the memory of boyhood.

The two novels about David Balfour are very notable examples of what I have mentioned generally as the Stevensonian note; the brisk and bright treatment, the short speeches, the sharp gestures and the pointed profile of energy, as of a man following his nose very rapidly along the open road. "The great scenes in *Kidnapped*, the defence of the Round House or the confrontation of Uncle Ebenezer

and Alan Breck, are full of those snapping phrases that seem to pick things off like pistol shots. A whole essay on the style of Stevenson, such as I shall attempt forlornly and ineffectually on another page, might be written by a real critic on the phrase, 'His sword flashed like quick-silver into the huddle of our fleeing enemies.' The fact that the name of a certain metal happens to combine the word 'silver' with the word 'quick' is simply a rather recondite accident; but the art of Stevenson consisted in taking advantage of such accidents. To those who say that such tricks are easy to play or such words easy to find, the only answer is, 'Go and find them.' An author cannot create words, unless he be the happy author of *Jaberwocky* or *The Land Where the Jumblies Live*; but the nearest he can come to creating them is finding them in such a fashion and for such a use. The characters in the story are excellent, though perhaps there are really only two of them. There are more in the sequel called *Catriona*; and the study of the Lord Advocate Prestongrange

is a highly interesting attempt to do a very difficult thing; to describe a politician who has not altogether ceased to be a man. The dialogue is spirited and full of fine Scottish humours, but all these things are almost as secondary in *Kidnapped* and *Catriona* as they are in *Treasure Island* itself. The thing is still simply an adventure story, and especially a boy's adventure story; such as is fitted to describe the adventures of a boy. And there are moments when it is the same boy; and his name is neither Hawkins nor Balfour, but Stevenson.

But though the thing is to be criticised (and admired) strictly as an adventure story, there are sidelights of interest about it considered as a historical novel. It carries on a rather curiously balanced critical attitude, partly inherited from the attitude of Sir Walter Scott; the paradox of being intellectually on the side of the Whigs and morally on the side of the Jacobites. There is enough moral material, in the story of the long legal murder of James of the Glens, to raise a whole clan of Jacobites and roll them red-hot down

the pass of Killiecrankie. But there still stands over against it the large legal assumption that in some sort of way all these things will be for the best, which is the inheritance of the providential view of the Presbyterian settlement. Similarly, it is obvious in the earlier story that David Balfour does not really differ very much from Alan Breck, in his view of the oppression of the Highland crofters and their pathetic loyalty to the past. In the ethical balance of the Appin Murder, if he does not palliate tyrannicide, he certainly says nothing calculated to palliate tyranny. It is obvious that he is moved and impressed with the spectacle of a whole peasantry loyal to their ideal and defying a more civilised but a much more cynical pressure. But, curiously enough, when Stevenson saw exactly the same story acted before his eyes in the tragedy of the peasants of Ireland, he was carried away by some newspaper nonsense about the wickedness of the Land League (prodded perhaps by the rather absurd Jingoism of Henley) and, with all his native courage and much less than his native sense,

wanted to plant himself on an eviction farm belonging to a family named Curtin, whom he seemed to regard as the sole victims of the social situation. It did not seem to occur to him that he was merely assisting the Master of Lovat to bully David Balfour. He seemed really to suppose that, in those social conditions, the Irish peasants could look for justice to imperial governments which abolished all local rights and carried away every Irish patriot to be tried before a packed jury of foreigners and foes. 'Justice, David! The same justice, by all the world, that Glenure found by the roadside.'

But this curious and sometimes inconsistent mingling of the grey Whiggery with the purple Jacobite romance, in the traditional sentiment of such Scots as Stevenson, is connected with much deeper things touching the hold that their history had upon them. It is necessary to state at this stage that there is really and seriously an influence of Scottish Puritanism upon Stevenson; though I think it rather a philosophy partially accepted by his intellect than the special ideal that was

the secret of his heart. But every philosopher is affected by philosophy; even if, as in the immortal instance in Boswell, cheerfulness is always breaking out. And there was a part of Stevenson's mind that was not cheerful; which I think, in some manifestations, was not even healthy. And yet the tribute of truth is due to that special Scottish element; that even when we say it was not healthy, we can hardly venture to say it was not strong. It was the shadow of that ancient heathen fatalism, which in the seventeenth century had taken the hardly less heathen form of Calvinism; and which had sounded in so many Scottish tragedies with a note of doom. We appreciate it sharply when we turn from his two Scottish comedies of adventure to his third Scottish romance, which is a tragedy of character. It is true, as may be noted later, that even into this concentrated drama of sin and sorrow there enters a curious and rather incongruous element of the adventure story; like a fragment of the former adventures of David or Jim. But leaving that aside for the moment, we must do

justice to the dignity which is given to the story itself by its more sombre scenery and its sterner creed. Stevenson showed his perfect instinct when he called it *A Winter's Tale*. It is his one story in black and white, and I cannot recall one word that is a patch of colour.

In touching on the rather neglected point of the nastier side of Puritan sociology, the raw and barbarous flavour about its evil and excess, I may have seemed to underrate the higher though harsher aspects of Scottish Puritanism. I do not mean to do so; and certainly nobody can afford to do so in attempting an adequate study of Stevenson. He remained to the day of his death in some ways particularly loyal to the Presbyterian tradition; I might say to the Presbyterian prejudices; and at least in one or two cases to the Presbyterian antipathies. But I think it was mostly rather a case of the modern religion of patriotism, as against the larger patriotism of religion. Like many other men of frank, tart and humorous prejudices (which are the sort of prejudices that need never prejudice us against a man)

he was apt to see in some foreign things the evils to which he had grown accustomed in native things; and to start again the great international dispute of the pot and the kettle. It is amusing, for instance, to find the young Scotsman in *Olalla* gravely disapproving of the grim Spanish crucifix, with its tortured and grimacing art; and presumably leaving that land of religious gloom, to go back and enjoy the charm and gaiety of Thrawn Janet. If there was ever grim and grimacing art, one would think it was in that twisted figure; and even Stevenson admitted that Olalla got more comfort from the crucifix than Janet from the minister; or, I will add, the minister from the ministry. Indeed, stories of this kind are told by Stevenson with a deliberate darkening of the Scottish landscape and exultation in the ferocity of the Scottish creed. But it would be quite a mistake to miss in this a certain genuine national pride running through all the abnormal artistry; and a sense that the strength of the tribal tragedy testifies in a manner to the strength of the tribe.

It might be maintained that the best effect of the Scotsman's religious training was teaching him to do without his religion. It enabled him to survive as a certain sort of freethinker; one who, unlike his more familiar fellows, is not so intoxicated with freedom as to forget to think. It might be said that among the Scots, so far from a sentimental religiosity taking the place of dogmatic religion (as is generally the case among the English), something like the very opposite had occurred. When the religion was dead, the theology remained: at any rate, the taste for theology remained. It remained because, whatever else it is, theology is at least a form of thought. Stevenson certainly retained this turn of mind long after his beliefs, like those of most of his generation, had been simplified to vanishing point. He was, as Henley said, something of the Shorter Catechist; even when his own Catechism had become shorter still. All this, however, was indubitably a strength to him and his nation; and a real reason for gratitude to their old religious tradition. Those dry Deists and hard-headed Utili-

tarians who stalked the streets of Glasgow and Edinburgh in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were very obviously the products of the national religious spirit. The Scottish atheists were unmistakable children of the Kirk. And though they often seemed absurdly detached and dehumanised, the world is now rather suffering for want of such dull lucidity. To put it shortly, by being theological they had at least learnt to be logical; and in dropping the Greek prefix as a superfluous trifle they will have the sympathy of many moderns much less logical than themselves. The influence of all this sort of clarity on Stevenson is very clear. It did not happen to be his mission to figure as the metaphysical Scotsman; or draw out his deductions along the lines of logic. But he did always by instinct draw lines that were as hard and clear as those of a mathematical diagram. He himself has made a very luminous and valuable comparison between a geometrical theorem and a work of art. I have had cause to remark again and again, in the course of this sketch, on a certain almost

arid decision in the strokes of Stevenson's style. I believe it was due in no small degree to that inheritance of definition, that goes with an inheritance of dogma. What he wrote was not written, as he said scornfully of some literary performance, in sand with a salt-spoon; it was at least in the tradition of scriptures cut with steel into stone. This was among the many good things that he got from the spiritual atmosphere of his ancestry. But he got other things as well; though they are less easy to describe and far less easy to commend.

From time to time I have insensibly and inevitably fallen into a tone of defending Stevenson, as if he needed defence. And indeed I do think that he needs some defence; though not upon the points in which it is now considered necessary to defend him. I do feel a certain impatience with the petty depreciation of our own time, which seems much more frivolous and far less generous than the boom of a best-seller. I do feel a certain contempt for those who call every phrase affected that happens to be effective; or who

charge a man with talking for effect, as if there were anything else to talk for. But I should think it very unfair to revile the revilers of Stevenson, without taking the risk of saying where I think he is, if not to be reviled, at least to be rebuked. There was, I think, a weaker strain in Stevenson; but it is the very opposite of the weakness now generally alleged by critics; indeed it is the very opposite of what they would probably regard as weak. The excuse for it, in so far as it existed to be excused, was in the very direction of that sharp turn which he took in early life, when he turned his back upon the decadents. I have already said, and it can hardly be said too often, that the story of Stevenson was a reaction against an age of pessimism. Now the real objection to being a reactionary is that a reactionary, as such, hardly ever avoids reacting into evil and exaggeration. The opposite of the heresy of pessimism was the twin heresy of optimism. Stevenson was not at all attracted to a placid and pacific optimism. But he did begin to be too much attracted to a sort of

insolent and oppressive optimism. The reaction from the idea that what is good is always unsuccessful is the idea that what is good is always victorious. And from that many slide into the worse delusion ; that what is victorious is always good.

In the days when Stevenson's ancestors the Covenanters were fighting with the Cavaliers, a fine old Cavalier of the Episcopalian persuasion made a rather interesting remark ; that the change he really hated was represented by saying 'The Lord' instead of 'Our Lord.' The latter implied affection, the former only fear ; indeed he described the former succinctly as the talk of devils. And this is so far true that the very eloquent language in which the name of 'The Lord' has figured has generally been the language of might and majesty and even terror. And there really was implied in it in varying degrees the idea of glorifying God for His greatness rather than His goodness. And again there occurred the natural inversion of ideas. Since the Puritan was content to cry with the Moslem : 'God is great,' so

the descendant of the Puritan is always a little inclined to cry with the Nietzschean : 'Greatness is God.' In some of the really evil extremes, this sentiment shaded darkly into a sort of diabolism. In Stevenson it was very faintly present ; but it is occasionally felt ; and by me (I must confess) felt as a fault. It is faintly felt, for instance, in the next great Scottish romance, *The Master of Ballantrae* ; it is felt more definitely, I think, in the last Scottish romance of *Weir of Hermiston*. In the first case, Stevenson said in his correspondence, in a tone that was humorous and healthy enough, that The Master was all he knew of The Devil. I do not in the least object to The Master being The Devil. But I do object to a subtle subconscious something, which every now and then seems almost to suggest that he is The Lord. I mean The Lord in the vague sense of a certain authority in aristocracy, or even in mere mastery. Perhaps I even dimly feel that there is the distant thunder of The Lord in the very title of The Master.

This thing, however we define it and in

whatever degree we admit it, had advanced in several degrees when he wrote the later story. Perhaps it was partly the influence of Henley; who, with all his many generous virtues, certainly had this weakness to the point of hysteria. I mean the loss of the natural reaction of a man against a tyrant. It sometimes takes the form of that least masculine of all vices, the admiration for brutality. It has been much debated whether bullies are always cowards; I am content to remark that the admirers of bullies are always, by the very nature of things, trying to be cowards. If they do not always succeed, it is because they have unconscious virtues restraining that obscene worship: and this was true even of Henley; and far truer of Stevenson. Stevenson had always a training in real courage; for he fought when he was weak. But it cannot be denied that, by a combination of causes, his own revolt against spineless pessimism, the reactionary violence of Henley, but chiefly I think the vague Scottish tradition of a God of mere power and terror, he grew too

familiar in his later works with the sort of swaggering cult of fear. I feel it in the character of Weir of Hermiston, or rather in the attitude of everybody else, including the author, towards that character. I do not mind the judge exulting over the game of insulting and hanging somebody; for I know the judge can be baser than the man he hangs. But I do mind the author exulting over it, when I know he is not base at all. The same fine shade of unpleasantness can be found in the last pages of *The Ebb-Tide*. My point might be put crudely by saying that I do not object to the author creating such a loathsome person as Mr. Attwater; but I do rather object to his creating him and not loathing him. It would be truer to put the point in another form; that there would be no objection if he loathed and admired Attwater exactly as he loathed and admired Huish. In a sense he obviously did admire Huish; as it was the very passion of his life to admire courage. But he did not expect anybody to look up to Huish; and there are moments when he seems to think it natural that

people should look up to Attwater. This secret idolatry of what a feminine sentiment calls 'strength,' this was the only lesion in Stevenson's perfect sanity, the only running sore in the normal health of his soul; and even that had come from too violent an effort to be healthy. So he might, poor fellow, have started a haemorrhage by moving too vigorously on his pillow.

For I am not blaming him for having any such evil, in the sense of having any excess of it. I blame him, being what he was, for having even a touch of it. But I think it is unfortunately certain that he did have a touch of it. There is something almost cruel in thus tracing the innocent springs of cruelty. But, as has been said so often and so foolishly and so truly, Robert Louis Stevenson was a child. It is the moral of these chapters about his nation, his city and his home, that he was also something more than a child. He was a lost child. There was nothing to guide him in the mad movements and reactions of modernity; neither his nation nor his religion nor his irreligion were

equal to the task. He had no chart for that gallant voyage; he was hardly to blame if he thought he had to choose between the savage rock of the pride of Scylla and the suicidal whirlpool of the despair of Charybdis. Only, like Ulysses, for all his adventurousness, he was always trying to get home. To vary the metaphor, his face was for ever turning like the sunflower towards the sun, even if it were behind a cloud; and perhaps after all there is nothing truer than the too familiar phrase from the diary of the doctor or the nurse; that he was a sick child, who passed his life in trying to get well.

# THE STYLE OF STEVENSON

(Read this chapter thoroughly)

# CHAPTER VI

## THE STYLE OF STEVENSON

BEFORE writing this chapter I ought to explain that I am quite incapable of writing it; at least as many serious literary authorities think it ought to be written. I am one of those humble characters for whom the main matter of style is concerned with making a statement; and generally, in the case of Stevenson, with telling a story. Style takes its own most living and therefore most fitting form from within; as the narrative quickens and leaps, or the statement becomes warm or weighty, by being either authoritative or argumentative. The sentence takes its shape from motion; as it takes its motion from motive. And the motive (for us outcasts) is what the man has to say. But there is a technical treatment of style for which I have a profound respect, but it is a respect for the unknown, not to say the unintelligible. I will not say it is Greek to me, for I know

the Greek alphabet and I do not know the alphabet of these grammars of çadence and sequence; I can still even read the Greek Testament, but the gospel of pure and abstract English brings me no news. I salute it from afar as I do musical harmony or the higher mathematics; but I shall not introduce into this book a chapter on any of these three topics. When I speak of the style of Stevenson I mean the manner in which he could express himself in plain English, even if it were in some ways peculiar English; and I have nothing but the most elementary English with which to criticise it. I cannot use the terms of any science of language, or even any science of literature. Mr. Max Beerbohm, whose fine and classic criticism is full of those shining depths that many mistake for shallowness, has remarked truly enough on the rather wearisome repetitions in the newspapers, which did great harm to the Stevensonian fame at the time of the Stevensonian fashion. He noticed especially that a certain phrase used by Stevenson about his early experiments in writing, that he

has 'played the sedulous ape' to Hazlitt or to Lamb, must be permanently kept in type in the journalistic offices, so frequently do the journalists quote it. There are about a thousand things in Stevenson much more worth quoting, and much more really enlightening about his education in letters. Every young writer, however original, does begin by imitating other people, consciously or unconsciously, and nearly every old writer would be quite as willing to admit it. The real irony in the incident seems never to have been noticed. The real reason why this confession of plagiarism, out of a hundred such confessions, is always quoted, is because the confession itself has the stamp not of plagiarism but of personal originality. In the very act of claiming to have copied other styles, Stevenson writes most unmistakably in his own style. I think I could have guessed amid a hundred authors who had used the expression 'played the sedulous ape.' I do not think that Hazlitt would have added that word 'sedulous.' Some might say he was the better because the simpler without

it; some would say that the word is in the strict sense too *recherché*; some might say it can be recognised because it is strained or affected. All that is matter for argument; but it is rather a joke when so individual a trick is made a proof of being merely imitative. Anyhow, that sort of trick, the rather curious combination of two such words, is the thing I mean by the style of Stevenson.

In the case of Stevenson, criticism has always tended to be hypercriticism. It is as if the critic were strung up to be as strict with the artist as the artist was with himself. But they are not very consistent or considerate in the matter. They blame him for being fastidious; and so become more fastidious themselves. They condemn him for wasting time in trying to find the right word; and then waste more time in not very successful attempts to prove it is the wrong word. I remember that Mr. George Moore (who at least led the attack when Stevenson was alive and at the height of his popularity) professed in a somewhat mysterious manner to have

exposed or exploded the whole trick of Stevenson, by dwelling at length on the word 'interjected': in the passage which describes a man stopping a clock with interjected finger. There seemed to be some notion that because the word is unusual in that use, it showed that there was nothing but artificial verbalism in the whole tragedy of *Jekyll and Hyde* or the fun of *The Wrong Box*. I think it is time that this sort of fastidiousness about fastidiousness should be corrected with a little common sense. The obvious question to ask Mr. Moore, if he objects to the word 'interjected,' is, 'What word would you use?' He would immediately discover that any other word would be much weaker and even much less exact. To say 'interposed finger' would suggest by its very sound a much clumsier and less precise action; 'interjected' suggests by its very sound a sort of jerk of neatness; a mechanical neatness correcting mechanism. In other words, it suggests what it was meant to suggest. Stevenson used the word because it was the right word. Nobody else used it, because nobody else

thought of it. And that is the whole story of Stevensonian style.

Literature is but language; it is only a rare and amazing miracle by which a man really says what he means. It is inevitable that most conversation should be convention; as when we cover a myriad beautiful contrasts or comedies of opposites by calling any number of different people 'nice.' Some writers, including Stevenson, desired (in the old and proper sense) to be more nice in their discrimination of niceness. Now whether we like such fastidious felicities or no, whether we are individually soothed or irritated by a style like that of Stevenson, whether we have any personal or impersonal reason for impatience with the style or the man, we ought really to have enough critical impartiality and justice to see what is the literary test. The test is whether the words are well or ill chosen, not for the purpose of fitting our own taste in words, but for the purpose of satisfying everybody's sense of the realities of things. Now it is nonsense for anybody who pretends to like literature not to see the

excellence of Stevenson's expression in this way. He does pick the words that make the picture that he particularly wants to make. They do fix a particular thing, and not some general thing of the same sort; yet the thing is often one very difficult to distinguish from other things of the same sort. That is the craft of letters; and the craftsman made a vast multitude of such images in all sorts of materials. In this matter we may say of Stevenson very much what he said of Burns. He remarked that Burns surprised the polite world, with its aesthetes and antiquarians, by never writing poems on waterfalls, ruined castles or other recognised places of interest; the very fact, of course, which showed Burns to be a poet and not a tourist. It is always the prosaic person who demands poetic subjects. They are the only subjects about which he can possibly be poetic. But Burns, as Stevenson said, had a natural gift of lively and flexible comment that could play as easily upon one thing as another; a kirk or a tavern or a group going to market or a pair of dogs in the street. This gift must

be judged by its aptness, its vividness and its range; and anybody who suggests that Stevenson's talent was only one piece of thin silver polished perpetually in its napkin does not, in the most exact and emphatic sense, know what he is talking about. Stevenson had exactly the talent he attributes to Burns of touching nothing that he did not animate. And so far from hiding one talent in one napkin, it would be truer to say that he became ruler over ten cities; set in the ends of the earth. Indeed the last phrase alone suggests an example or a text.

I will take the case of one of his books; I deliberately refrain from taking one of his best books. I will take *The Wrecker*, a book which many would call a failure and which nobody would call a faultless artistic success, least of all the artist. The picture breaks out of the frame; indeed it is rather a panorama than a picture. The story sprawls over three continents; and the climax has too much the air of being only the last of a long string of disconnected passages. It has the look of a scrap-book; indeed it is very

exactly a sketch-book. It is merely the sketch-book of Loudon Dodd, the wandering art student never allowed to be fully an artist; just as his story is never allowed to be fully a work of art. He sketches people with the pen as he does with the pencil, in four or five incongruous societies, in the commercial school of Muskegon or the art school of Paris, in the east wind of Edinburgh or the black squall of the South Seas; just as he sketched the four fugitive murderers gesticulating and lying in the Californian saloon. The point is (on the strict principles of *l'art pour l'art*, so dear to Mr. Dodd) that he sketched devilish well. We can take the portraits of twenty social types in turn, taken from six social worlds utterly shut out from each other, and find in every case that the strokes are at once few and final; that is, that the word is well chosen out of a hundred words and that one word does the work of twenty. The story starts: 'The beginning of this yarn is my poor father's character'; and the character is compact in one paragraph. When Jim Pinkerton first strides into the story and

is described as a young man 'with cordial, agitated manners,' we walk through the rest of the narrative with a living man; and listen not merely to words, but to a voice. No other two adjectives could have done the trick. When the shabby and shady lawyer, with his cockney culture and underbred refinement, is first introduced as handling a big piece of business beyond his *metier*, he bears himself 'with a sort of shrinking assumption.' The reader, especially if he is not a writer, may imagine that such words matter little; but if he supposes that it might just as well have been 'flinching pride' or 'quailing arrogance' he knows nothing about writing and perhaps not much about reading. The whole point is in that hitting of the right nail on the head; and rather more so when the nail is such a very battered little tintack as Mr. Harry D. Bellairs of San Francisco. When Loudon Dodd merely has to meet a naval officer and record that he got next to nothing out of him, that very negation has a touch of chilly life like a fish. 'I judged he was suffering torments of alarm

lest I should prove an undesirable acquaintance; diagnosed him for a shy, dull, vain, unamiable animal, without adequate defence—a sort of dishoused snail.' The visit to an English village, under the shadow of an English country house, is equally aptly appreciated; from the green framework of the little town, 'a domino of tiled houses and walled gardens,' to the reminiscences of the ex-butler about the exiled younger son; 'near four generations of Carthews were touched upon without eliciting one point of interest; and we had killed Mr. Henry in the hunting field with a vast elaboration of painful circumstance and buried him in the midst of a whole sorrowing county, before I could so much as manage to bring upon the stage my intimate friend, Mr. Norris. . . . He was the only person of the whole featureless series who seemed to have accomplished anything worth mentioning; and his achievements, poor dog, seemed to have been confined to going to the devil and leaving some regrets. . . . He had no pride about him, I was told; he would sit down with any man; and it

was somewhat woundingly implied that I was indebted to this peculiarity for my own acquaintance with the hero.' But I must not be led away by the large temptation of quoting examples of the cool and collected and sustained irony, with which Loudon Dodd tells his whole story. I am only giving random examples of his rapid sketches of very different sorts of societies and personalities; and the point is that he can describe them rapidly and yet describe them rightly. In other words the author does possess a quite exceptional power of putting what he really means into the words that really convey it. And to show that this was a matter of genius in the man, and not (as some of his critics would imply) a matter of laborious technical treatment applied to two or three prize specimens, I have taken all these examples from one of the less known works, one of the least admired and perhaps of the least admirable. Whole tracts of it run almost as casually as his private correspondence; and his private correspondence is full of the same lively and animated neatness.

In this one neglected volume of *The Wrecker* there are thousands of such things; and everything to show that he could have written twenty more volumes, equally full of these felicities. A man who does this is not only an artist doing what most men cannot do, but he is certainly doing what most novelists do not do. Even very good novelists have not this particular knack of putting a whole human figure together with a few unforgettable words. By the end of a novel by Mr. Arnold Bennett or Mr. E. F. Benson I have the sense that Lord Raingo or Lord Chesham is a real man, very rightly understood; but I never have at the beginning that feeling of magic; that a man has been brought to life by three words of an incantation.

This was the genius of Stevenson; and it is simply silly to complain of it because it was Stevensonian. I do not blame either of the other two novelists for not being somebody else. But I do venture to blame them a little for grumbling because Stevenson was himself. I do not quite see why he should be covered with

cold depreciation merely because he could put into a line what other men put into a page; why he should be regarded as superficial because he saw more in a man's walk or profile than the moderns can dig out of his complexes and his subconsciousness; why he should be called artificial because he sought (and found) the right word for a real object; why he should be thought shallow because he went straight for what was significant, without wading towards it through wordy seas of insignificance; or why he should be treated as a liar because he was not ashamed to be a story-teller.

Of course there are many other vivid marks of Stevenson's style, besides this particular element of picked and pointed phrase, or rather especially the combination of picked and pointed phrases. I might make much more than I have made out of something in his rapidly stepping sentences, especially in narrative, which corresponds to his philosophy of the militant attitude and the active virtues. That word angular, which I have been driven to use too often, belongs to the

sharpness of his verbal gestures as much as to the cutlasses and choppers of his pasteboard pirates. Those early theatrical figures, from the sketch-book of Skelt, were all of them in their nature like snap-shots of people in swift action. Three-Fingered Jack could not have remained permanently with the cudgel or the sabre swung about his head nor Robin Hood with the arrow drawn to his ear; and the descriptions of Stevenson's characters are seldom static but rather dynamic descriptions; and deal rather with how a man did or said something than with what he was like. The sharp and shrewd Scottish style of Ephraim Mackellar or David Balfour seems by its very sound exactly fitted to describe a man snapping his fingers or rapping with his stick. Doubtless so careful an artist as Stevenson varied his style to suit the subject and the speaker; we should not look for these dry or abrupt brevities in the dilettante deliberations of Loudon Dodd; but I know very few of the writer's works in which there are not, at the crisis, phrases as short and sharp as the knife that Captain

Wicks rammed through his own hand. Something should also have been said, of course, of the passages in which Stevenson deliberately plays on a somewhat different musical instrument; as when he exercised upon Pan's Pipes in respectful imitation of Meredith upon a penny whistle. Something should have been said of the style of his poems; which are perhaps more successful in their phraseology than their poetry. But these again teem with these taut and trenchant separate phrases; the description of the interlacing branches like crossed swords in battle; the men upholding the falling skies like unfrowning caryatids; the loud stairs of honour and the bright eyes of danger. But I have already explained that I profess no scientific thoroughness about these problems of execution; and can only speak of the style of Stevenson as it specially affects my own taste and fancy. And the thing that strikes me most is still this sense of somebody being pinked with a rapier in a particular button; of a sort of fastidiousness that has still something of the fighting spirit; that aims at a mark

and makes a point, and is certainly not merely an idle trifling with words for the sake of their external elegance or intrinsic melody. As a part of the present criticism, such a statement is only another way of saying, in the old phrase, that the style is the man; and that the man was certainly a man and not only a man of letters. I find everywhere, even in his mere diction and syntax, that theme that is the whole philosophy of fairy-tales, of the old romances and even of the absurd libretto of the little theatre—the conception that man is born with hope and courage indeed, but born outside that which he was meant to attain; that there is a quest, a test, a trial by combat or pilgrimage of discovery; or, in other words, that whatever else man is he is not sufficient to himself, either through peace or through despair. The very movement of the sentence is the movement of a man going somewhere and generally fighting something; and that is where optimism and pessimism are alike opposed to that ultimate or potential peace, which the violent take by storm.

# EXPERIMENT AND RANGE

# CHAPTER VII

## EXPERIMENT AND RANGE

In any generalisation about Stevenson, it is of course easy to forget that his work was very varied, in the sense of being very versatile. In one sense, he tried very different styles; and was always very careful only to try one style at a time. The unity of each accentuates the diversity of all. The very fact that he was careful to keep each several study in its own tone or tint, makes the range of his work look more like a patchwork than it really is. It is always a sharp contrast between complete and homogeneous things; when these things are broken up into subdivisions, the whole falls back into a more mixed but a more general pattern. In one sense this is merely a platitude. It would hardly be difficult to point out that the style of *Prince Otto* is very different from the style of *The Wrong Box*. It is different with the whole difference between a man working in wax or card-

board or ivory or ebony. *Prince Otto* is a sort of china shepherdess group, practising arcadian courtliness in an eighteenth-century park; the other is a sort of Aunt Sally pelted with comic misfortunes as if with cocoanuts. Nobody is likely to confuse these forms of art; nobody sets up a china shepherdess to be pelted with cocoanuts; few are so chivalrous as to approach their Aunt Sally with the deferential bows of a courtier. But when we get past this obvious contrast, which nobody could possibly miss, we find that (in a queer manner) there is versatility without variety. What makes those two stories stand out in our memory is a certain spirit with which they are told; yes, and even a certain style as well as spirit. It is not exactly the stories themselves; still less is it any real immersion of the author in the subjects of the stories themselves. We feel, even as we read, that Stevenson would be the last man really to wish to be imprisoned for life in a petty German court or poised for ever amid such very fragile china. We know it, just as we know that Stevenson does

not really intend to turn his attention to the leather-business, or even (though here we may fancy the temptation stronger) to become a rowdy solicitor with shady clients, in the manner of the priceless Mr. Michael Finsbury. We remember the treatment more than the subject; because the treatment is really much more alive than the subject. Long after the ghosts in that ornamental garden have faded, and we have completely forgotten Who was Who at the court of Prince Otto, we hear and remember in the depths of that valley, 'the solid plunge of the cataract.' And long after the details of the Tontine System have become blurred and all the far less interesting details of our own daily life along with them, when all lesser things have diminished and life itself is fading from my eyes—I shall still see before me the Form called up by that inspired paragraph: 'His costume was of a mercantile brilliancy best described as stylish; nor could anything be said against him, except that he was a little too like a wedding guest to be quite a gentleman.'

Even through these wide divergences of

subject, therefore, there runs something which is not only the genius but decidedly the method of Stevenson. In one sense he is careful to vary the style; in another sense the style is never varied. We might say, so to speak, that it is the style within the style that is never varied. But subject to this general understanding, it is only just to him to insist on the wide range that he managed to cover in his short and very much hampered literary life. He once reproached himself with not having enlarged his life by building lighthouses as well as writing books. But the firm of Stevenson and Son might have been mildly convulsed if there had risen on every side lighthouses in seven styles of architecture; a Gothic lighthouse, an ancient Egyptian lighthouse, and a lighthouse like a Chinese pagoda. And that is what he did with the towers of imagination and the light of reason.

There are indeed, as I have hinted, one or two places where it may be maintained that Stevenson let his style stray; and wandered into other tracks, sometimes older tracks, away from the immediate

track of travel. Personally, I have this feeling about the wanderings of the Master of Ballantrae and the Chevalier Burke. They are a sort of adventure story in the wrong place; and though Mr. James Durie was certainly an adventurer in the bad sense, it is impossible to make him one in the good. It is impossible to turn a villain into a hero for the purposes of pure romance; Jim Hawkins could not have gone on his adventures permanently arm-in-arm with Long John Silver. The episode of Blackbeard is a sort of fizzling anti-climax, spluttering like the blue matches in that fool's hat. Such a shoddy person had no claim to be so much as mentioned in that spiritual tragedy of the terrible twin spirits; the brothers of Durrisdeer. It is almost as if pirates were really a private mania with the author; and he could not keep them out of the tale if he tried; though pirates have really no more business in this tale than pirates in *The Wrong Box*. But it is curious to note how completely they are discoloured by the white death-ray that shines on that winter's tale. Their blood and gold were

not really red; their seas were not even really blue. This was no occasion for Twopence Coloured. The very style of Mackellar's narrative might be shrewdly summed up indeed under the title of A Penny Plain. But this is not only because that worthy steward was addicted to plainness and not averse to pennies. It is also because he is addicted to home and habit and averse to adventure; and the notion of the Master dragging him across half the world has something about it ungainly and grotesque and unworthy of the intensity of their intellectual and spiritual relations. The truth is that the Master of Ballantrae is not only a family demon but also a family ghost; and ought not to haunt any house except his own. Ghosts do not travel like tourists; even for the pleasure of visiting their relatives in the colonies. The story of the Duries is emphatically domestic; like those very domestic stories of home life in which Œdipus butchered his father or Orestes trampled on the body of his mother. These incidents were regrettable, and even painful; but they were all kept in the

family. Something tells us that most of them happened behind high barred doors or in terrible unrecorded interviews. They did not wash their bloody linen in public; least of all did they wash it in all the seven seas of the British Empire. But the appearance of the Master first in India and then in America has almost the suggestion of the Prince of Wales on an imperial tour. Now those scenes in *The Master of Ballantrae* which do take place in the dark house of his fathers, or in the dim and wintry plantations without, do have an indefinable grandeur and even hugeness of outline that recalls the Greek tragedies. Nay, they have even that hint of long wanderings and remote places, which is lost when the wanderings and the places are too elaborately followed out. At that unforgotten moment when the stranger first stands up, long and black and slender on the point of rock, and makes a motion with his cane that is like a spoken word of mockery, we do feel that he might have come from the ends of the earth, that he might have strolled from the empire of the Mogul or fallen from the moon. But

the irony of the story is in that hateful love, or that pure love of hatred, that is the link between him and his ; and makes him as domestic as the roof-tree even when he is as destructive as the battering-ram. It is curious, and perhaps over-curious, to find this rare fault in the work which is in its principal parts so faultless. It may seem still more pedantic to pick another very small hole in it ; but it seems to me that Stevenson missed one great chance, in a way he rarely did, when he made even Mackellar such a prig as to write for the last line of the epitaph a phrase like, 'With his fraternal enemy.' Surely the words would have stood out with a much more sinister and significant finality, if he had merely written, 'And sleeps in the same grave with his brother.'

But this mixture of two types of tale in one is the very reverse of characteristic. I know not where else in his works it can be found ; unless perhaps we might take exception to the slight element of political irritation that makes itself felt, of all places in the world, in the amiable night-mare of *The Dynamiter*. It is really im-

possible to use a story in which everything is ridiculous to prove that certain particular Fenians or anarchist agitators are ridiculous. Nor indeed is it tenable that men who risk their lives to commit such crimes are quite so ridiculous as that. But broadly speaking, the characteristic of this writer's conscientious artistry is that he is very careful to keep the different forms of art in water-tight compartments. It was, of course, a sentiment about technique and material which was very fashionable in the age of Whistler and the world where Stevenson had studied art. And the artist would as soon have stuck a lump of marble into the middle of a bas-relief in terracotta, or applied a coat of paint to a tracery he was making out of ivory, as put a piece of tragedy into the middle of a tea-table comedy or a burst of righteous indignation into a farce. In all this part of Stevenson's mind, especially as revealed in his letters, most of the critics have missed the very lasting effect of the chatter of craftsmanship, and all the jargon of tricks of the trade, which he heard among the French art students.

He had reversed almost the whole philosophy of everything that they wanted to do; but he still retained the dialect in which they talked about how it was done. But he talked it much better than they did; and he had his own knack of using the right word even for the search for the right word. It is typical that he said that a story must have one general tendency; and that in the whole book there must not be a single word 'that looks the other way.' There is not a single word that looks the other way in the whole of *Prince Otto* or in the whole of *The Wrong Box.*

But now and then he did something more than this. He created a form of art. He invented a *genre* which does not really exist outside his work. It may seem a paradox to say that his most original work was a parody. But certainly the notion of *The New Arabian Nights* is quite as unique in the world as the old *Arabian Nights*; and it does not owe its real ingenuity to the model which it mocks. Stevenson here wove a singular sort of texture, or mixed a singular sort of atmo-

sphere, which is not like anything else; a medium in which many incongruous things may find a comic congruity. It is partly like the atmosphere of a dream; in which so many incongruous things cause no surprise. It is partly the real atmosphere of London at night; it is partly the unreal atmosphere of Baghdad. The broad and placid presence of Prince Florizel of Bohemia, that mysterious semi-reigning sovereign, is treated with a sort of vast and vague diplomatic reserve; which is like the confused nightmare of an old cosmopolitan courtier. The Prince himself seems to have palaces in every country; and yet the humorous reader suspects, with half his mind, that the man is really only a pompous tobacconist, whom Stevenson happened to find in Rupert Street and chose to make the hero of a standing joke. This double mentality, like that of the true dreamer, is suggested with extraordinary skill without loading with a single question the inimitable lightness of the narrative. The humour of Florizel's colossal condescension constitutes not only a new

character, but a new sort of character. He stands in a new relation to reality and unreality; he is a sort of solid impossibility. Since that time many writers have written such fanciful extravagances about the lights of London; for Stevenson suffered much more than Tennyson from that of which the latter complained when 'all had got the seed.' But few of them have really struck those ironical semitones or made the same thing so completely a cockney conspiracy and an Arabian fairy-tale. We have heard much of making the life of the modern town romantic; and many of the attempts in modern poetry seem only to make it more ugly than it really is. We have at the present moment a considerable cult of the fantastic; with the result that the fantastic has become rather a fixed type. It is picked out in crying colours of crome yellow or magenta; with the result that it is perhaps too obviously a puppet. But Prince Florizel of Bohemia is not a puppet. He is a presence; a person who seems to fill the room and yet to be such stuff as dreams are made of; not simply a thing

made of stuffing. The rigid and unreal dolls may fall into dust when the mood changes; but we do not easily imagine anybody kicking the stuffing out of Florizel. I will not say that the *New Arabian Nights* is the greatest of Stevenson's works; though a considerable case might be made for the challenge. But I will say that it is probably the most unique; there was nothing like it before, and, I think, nothing equal to it since.

But it is worth while to remark that even here, where the atmosphere might be expected to be more hazy, the generalisation stands about edges and the exact extravagance of Skelt. However delicate is the air of mockery or mystery, there is very little change in the staccato style. The quarrel with the Suicide Club is 'put to the touch of swords' and the phrase tingles like the twin blades of Durisdeer. Nothing could be more angular than Mr. Malthus, the horrible paralysed man who plays on the brink of the precipice of suicide; he is as hard as a huge beetle. There is all the jerk of the old energetic puppets when he jumps from his seat,

losing his disease for an instant at the sight of death. There is more movement in that one paralytic than in crowds of softly moving society figures, in milder or more meditative fiction. The very clatter of his broken bones down the stone steps of Trafalgar Square, of which we hear but an echo, has that almost metallic quality. Jack Vandeleur's 'brutalities of gesture,' his pantomime of opening and shutting the hand, are surely somewhat piratical; he had been Dictator of Paraguay; but I think he had sailed there on the *Hispaniola*. In short we have here once more the continuity of a style within a style. And the inner thread within the silk is as thin and hard as wire.

Again, it illustrates this variety of experiment that Stevenson also wrote a detective story; or as he characteristically called it (in a sort of pedantic plain English) a police novel. He wrote it in collaboration with Mr. Lloyd Osbourne; and I have considered another aspect of it already, in the local colour of *The Wrecker*. But *The Wrecker* is ultimately a police novel; and the best sort of police novel,

in which the police are never called in. Stevenson explained his reasons for leading up to the problem with studies of social life; and certainly it says much for the liveliness of that life that we do not grow so impatient as to offer the obvious comment. Otherwise we should certainly make one reasonable criticism. The writer may be pardoned if he is a long time getting to the solution, but not when he is such a long time getting to the mystery. It must be confessed that we have to wait for the question to be asked, as well as for it to be answered. Personally I am very glad to wait in the waiting-room of Pinkerton and Dodd. But anyhow when the question is asked, it is with great animation; and the excitement of beginning to piece together a puzzle, which is the essence of a detective story, has seldom been more lively and lifelike than in the cross questions and crooked answers of Captain Nares and his super-cargo. Here, however, the detective story merely illustrates the fact of his having almost as many irons in the fire as Jim Pinkerton. It illustrates the general fact

that he tried a great many different styles; and yet his style was not different.

If there were experiments in which his touch was less happy they were, strangely enough perhaps, those connected with the simple or semi-savage world in which he found so much happiness. *The Island Nights' Entertainments* are not quite so entertaining as the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, whether New or Old. The explanation may be found, perhaps, in that casual phrase with which he swept the South Seas and swept away a good many imperial or international illusions, probably without knowing it; when he said of all those regions, 'It is a large ocean but a narrow world.' He did not really find new types, at least among the white men; he rather found new countries full of old and battered types, white men who no longer looked very conspicuously white. One exception must be allowed; the story of *The Ebb-Tide* has a very great deal of kick in it; even though we hardly have the full satisfaction of seeing all the characters kicked. Anyhow, it is quite certain that whatever was the cause of

the relative ineffectiveness of some of the work done at Vailima, it was not due to his having written himself out or experienced any weakening of power. For the very last days of all were spent in producing what was, or would have been, his most powerful piece of work. I have said something elsewhere, in connection with the Scottish romances, of his last great story, which is unfortunately a great fragment. Actually (I am tempted to say fortunately) the story named after Weir of Hermiston is not mainly about Weir of Hermiston. At least it is not about the first and most famous person of that name; and the best chapters of the book now in existence are concerned with the most sensitive and passionate shades of the Scottish temperament; richer shades of passion than he had ever yet attempted to touch. If ever the grey moor turned purple, it did at the moment when the girl lifted her voice to sing the song of the Elliots. He never forgets his abrupt gesture; and it was never so arresting as when her psalm-book page was rent across.

When Stevenson drew the long bow for the last time, like Robin Hood, he had two strings to his bow; and they both broke; but one was much stronger than the other. In other words he had two stories in his head, both of which broke off short; and perhaps it is not surprising that the weaker was rather neglected in favour of the stronger. The story of *St. Ives* contains excellent things, as does everything that he ever wrote, down to the most casual private letter. But it may be called disappointing, with rather more exactitude than is usual in the use of that word. *St. Ives* can hardly avoid being a sort of historical novel; and yet it is a rather unhistorical novel. By which I do not mean that there may be mistakes about dates or details; which matter nothing in fiction and are made too much fuss of even in history. I mean it is unhistorical in showing a strange lack of historical imagination and the sense of historical opportunity. It is the story of a soldier of Napoleon imprisoned on Edinburgh Rock and escaping from it. But indeed we might fancy it was Stevenson

and not St. Ives who was imprisoned on Edinburgh Rock. And Stevenson does not escape from it. Such a subject demanded a sort of international interpreter; but it is in truth the most strangely insular of all his books. St. Ives is not a Frenchman; he is the less and not the more French because he is given all the foppery and swagger which spinsters in Edinburgh in 1813 doubtless did associate with a Frenchman. He is no more a French soldier than Bonaparte was Boney. He has neither the French realism nor the French idealism. He does not look at England as a Frenchman of the revolutionary wars would have looked at it. This story is simply France seen from Britain; it is not, as it should be, Britain seen from France. Unless St. Ives were a very bitter Royalist (which he evidently was not, but a moderate Bonapartist) he would quite certainly have conceived himself as carrying not mere military glory but the light of reason and philosophy and social justice to the aristocratic and autocratic states. He would have been impatient with the illogical resistance to

rational things; not merely annoyed at not being shaved or provided with a looking-glass. But St. Ives is not a French soldier. He is a man in a French uniform; but so was Alan Breck Stewart. And that blessed and beloved name may perhaps recall to us that vanity and a love of fine coats can occasionally be found, even in the British Isles.

But perhaps in this very insularity there is something like a return to earlier things, and a rounding off of his life. In that sense the story of Stevenson, like the story of St. Ives, began on the crag and castle of Edinburgh; and it may be right that it should in a fashion end there, and not really get any further. The most really Stevensonian scenes, in their spirit and spitfire animation, are those which occur first in the prison. It seems almost as if St. Ives was more free before he escaped. The business of the duel with sticks turned into spears, by the addition of scissor-blades, has all the hilarity of his old dance of death. That alone serves as an excellent symbol of that magnifying of the sharp and the metallic; and the

way in which steel was always a sort of magnet to his mind. Perhaps he was the first quiet householder to whom it ever occurred to see even scissors as swords.

But the book offers a yet better example of this return to an almost narrowly national romance, like the flight of a homing bird. It occurs almost in the first few lines of the book; yet it might stand in a fashion for a title to all his books. It occurs in connection with the highly characteristic passage, typical of his love of gay pictorial colouring, in which he instantly lights up the prison hill with flames; saying that the yellow convict coats and the red uniforms made up together 'a lively picture of hell.' And with reference to this he remarks, as if in passing, that the ancient Pictish or Celtic name of that castle of Edinburgh was 'The painted hill,' or, as I have seen it somewhere in another version, 'The painted rock.' That might stand as a symbol of many things here less sufficiently suggested; of a Scotsman dressed, or almost disguised, as an artist;

of a style that could be at once abrupt and austere, and yet was always vivid with colour; but above all of that combination of colour with a solemn and childish caricature which we have seen in the background of his boyhood; for the landscape of Skelt consisted entirely of painted rocks. Stevenson had a passion of compression. With all his output, he had a strange ambition to be a man of few words. It seems to me that he was always seeking in words for a combination that should be also a compression; for two words that should instantly give birth to the third thing that he really wanted to say. It may be questioned, of him as of any other artist, whether he ever really succeeded in saying it. But we might amuse ourselves with the fancy that such a system of brilliant abbreviations might be more and more rapidly, like signals, uttered and understood; that some day a symbol of two words might stand for a thesis as a cryptic Chinese character stands for a word; and that all men could easily write and read such compact hieroglyphics. If that were so, it were

hardly an exaggeration to say that the great mission given by God to Robert Louis Stevenson was to say the words 'painted rock' and perish.

Anyhow, it was in the midst of these new experiments that he did perish; fulfilling the very terms of his challenge in *Aes Triplex*; of the happy man whom death finds flushed with hope and planning vast foundations. And indeed his death may well come also at the end of this chapter of experiment, as the last of his experiments. I was a lad when the news came to England; and I remember that some of his friends doubted at first, because the telegram said that he died making a salad; and they 'had never heard of his doing such a thing.' And I remember fancying, with a secret arrogance, that I knew one thing about him better than they did, though I never saw him with these mortal eyes; for it seemed to me that if there were something that Stevenson had never been known to do before, it would be the very thing that he would do. So indeed he died mixing new salads of many sorts; and the image is

not inappropriate or irreverent; but only touched with a certain lightness and resilience as of a coiled spring that belonged to him from first to last; and is that quality which Dr. Sarolea has truly called the French spirit of Stevenson. He died swiftly as if struck with an arrow and even over his grave something of a higher frivolity hovers upon wings like a bird; 'Glad did I live and gladly die,' has a lilt that no repetition can make quite unreal, light as the lifted spires of Spy-glass Hill and translucent as the dancing waves; types of a tenuous but tenacious levity and the legend that has made his graveyard a mountain-peak and his epitaph a song.

# THE LIMITS OF A CRAFT

# CHAPTER VIII

## THE LIMITS OF A CRAFT

THE truest adverse criticism of Stevenson was written by Stevenson. It was also very Stevensonian; for it took the form of saying, about his own fictitious characters, that his temptation was always 'to cut the flesh off the bones.' Even here we may note his peculiar cutting or hacking accent; it sounds like some horrid crime of Barbecue or Billy Bones. Indeed that word is sufficiently symbolic of Stevenson. His name might have been Bones, like the seafaring man at the 'Admiral Benbow'; nor was this only because his eternal boyhood was as full of skeletons as the school life of Traddles. It was also because of a certain bony structure in his whole taste and turn of mind; something that was angular though slender like his own slim and brittle frame and long Quixotic face. Nevertheless the words were uttered as a condemnation; and they were a just condemnation.

The real defect of Stevenson as a writer, so far from being a sort of silken trifling and superficial or superfluous embroidery, was that he simplified so much that he lost some of the comfortable complexity of real life. He treated everything with an economy of detail and a suppression of irrelevance which had at last something about it stark and unnatural. He is to be commended among authors for sticking to the point; but real people do not stick quite so stubbornly to the point as that. We can here best realise his real error, as well as his real originality, by comparing him with the great Victorian novelists in whose vast shadow he grew up. I shall have occasion to note afterwards that his collision was not with these in the matter of morals or philosophy; for on that side he was looking forward and not back. But there is a strong contrast, and a striking new departure, in the passage from the very best of Thackeray or Trollope to the first sketches, I had almost said scratches, of Stevenson. Those sketches were in a few lines, and only of the necessary lines; it was the whole

point that one unnecessary line was a loss and not a gain. Compared with this, the very best of the old Victorian novels were full of padding. But there was something to be said for the Victorian padding; as there was for the Victorian upholstery. Comfort is not always a contemptible thing, when its other name is hospitality; and Dickens and Thackeray and Trollope had a huge hospitality for their own characters. They were heartily and unaffectedly glad to see them; and especially glad to see them again. Hence their taste for sequels and continuous family histories; and all the positively last appearances of Mr. Pendennis or Mrs. Proudie. And this repetition, this rambling, even this padding, did in a curious confused fashion confirm the reality of the characters. As the padded Victorian furniture did really make people feel at home, so the padded Victorian novels made the reader feel at home with the characters. Now the reader never does feel quite at home with Stevenson's characters. He cannot get rid of an impression that he knows too little about them; though he knows that

he knows all that is important about them. His tragedy is that he knows only what is important. Alan Breck Stewart is not only a very lively but a very loveable character. And yet there is too little of him to love; though he might well draw his claymore upon us, if we made so dangerous an allusion. We are not quite at ease with him, as we are at ease with Pickwick or Pendennis. We know the vital things about him; and they are very vital. But we do not know *thousands* of things about him; as we do about a man with whom we have lived through a long Early Victorian novel. Stevenson has in fact done exactly what he accused himself of doing; it is he who wields the claymore and he has cut the flesh off the bones.

An illustration of the difference, of course, could be found in the presentation of the externals of a character. The dark vivacity of the face of Alan Breck, the eyes with their 'dancing madness, at once engaging and alarming,' springs up before us as clearly as a coloured photograph in the first few words of description; and

the same few words have already set strutting the whole brisk little figure in the blue coat and silver buttons and the swagger of the big sword. But the whole operation is so rapid and complete as to have something about it almost unconvincing, like a conjuring trick. It is like seeing something by a single flash of lightning; there is in that illumination a sort of illusion. For in the heart of anything that partakes of magic there is also something of mockery. It is not so that we 'get to know' the personal appearance of somebody in Thackeray or Trollope. It is by a multitude of apparently accidental or even unnecessary allusions that we gradually gain the impression that Warrington was dark and moody with a blue shaven chin. The appearance of Lord Steyne is scattered all over *Vanity Fair* in scraps; his red whiskers in one chapter, his bandy legs in another, his bald head in a third. But this is so like the way in which we really do talk about real people, that in comparison there is something almost unreal about Stevenson's rapid realism. Perhaps

the story-teller ought to remember more often that he is a man telling a story. Perhaps he even forgets that it is supposed to sound like a true story. And after all a man does not say to his wife at dinner, in real life, 'A stranger came to my office this morning; he was of an elegant, strenuous figure, with a fine falcon profile, the eyebrows and the corners of the mouth touched with temper; and a general appearance which, though not without distinction, was thrown up in a somewhat theatrical fashion by his dashing cutaway coat and white spats and the magenta-coloured orchid in his buttonhole.' Such a soliloquy seldom resounds in the suburban home; and if the stranger's appearance comes to count for anything, it comes out bit by bit; as in saying, 'I wasn't altogether surprised when he threw the inkstand; for I saw by his eyebrows he had a beast of a temper,' or, 'The office-boy was taken out incapacitated with [redacted]ughter at the first sight of the spats.' [redacted] the same way, nobody does actually [redacted]ay, as Mackellar does in the Stevensonian [redacted]omance, 'I was now near enough to see

him, a very handsome figure and countenance, swarthy, lean, long, with a quick, alert, black look, as of one who was a fighter and accustomed to command; upon one cheek he had a mole, not unbecoming; a large diamond sparkled on his hand; his clothes, although of the one hue, were of a French and foppish design; his ruffles, which he wore longer than common, of exquisite lace.' Men do not really describe things like that; would that they described anything so well! These facts about the Master of Ballantrae would have come out in a more fragmentary fashion in the real record of a real Mackellar. The diamond would have been mentioned in connection with a rumour of thieves; the lace in connection with the laundry. And that is more or less how the older Victorian novelists did often describe or mention these things; and I think it really does give an impression of reality. Compared with it, the very completeness of Stevenson seem[redacted] incomplete. But it is also true that t[redacted] older Victorians could not have achieve[redacted] this familiar realism except by being [redacted]

little more formless than Stevenson and lacking his beautiful and piercing sense of the clarity of form. Though he may seem to describe his subject in detail, he describes it to be done with it; and he does not return to the subject. He never says anything needlessly; above all he never says anything twice. Few will venture to say that Thackeray never says anything twice; or that he was incapable in some cases of saying twenty times. Yet in some ways this repetition, though sometimes boring, is somehow convincing; I might almost say comforting. It comes from that comfortable sense of social ease, which was a mark of the England of that brief period of mercantile success; or at least of that part of England which consisted of the merchants who had succeeded. And it exhibited, along with its other virtues and vices, that rather coarse benevolence that was at once a virtue and a vice. 'The British merchant's son shan't want, sir,' said old Mr. Osborne; and neither should the spiritual child of Mr. William Makepeace Thackeray. Words shall be poured out on him like wine;

pages shall be open for him like parks, in which he may wander. He shall be allowed to hang about as long as he likes and the poorest relations of the story shall be asked again and again to dinner. In short, the reader shall 'get to know him' and discuss all sorts of little details about him at leisure; they shall not all be disposed of once and for all in one closely packed paragraph. We return to the word hospitality; and the chatter of a hundred friends and relations at an English Christmas party. In comparison the verbal economy of the Scottish romancer suggests something of the old joke against the Scot. He is so very thrifty that his characters are almost thin.

The loftiest things of this world have their weakness or defect; and with that word 'thin' we come to the limit of the glory of Skelt and discover that even the maker of toy theatres is human. Just as Stevenson gained in that school of boyish bravado his admirable sense of symbolic attitude and action, his deep joy in gay colour and gallant carriage, his fine feeling for life as a story and honour as a fight;

his response to the challenge of the open door or the drag of the road over the hill —as he gained all these great virtues and values under the symbol of A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured, so he betrayed also even in his best work something of the technical limitation of such an instrument. And it cannot be more clearly stated than by saying that these flat figures could only be seen from one side. They are aspects or attitudes of men rather than men ; though the aspects and attitudes are of great importance considered as symbols, like the flat haloes of saints or the flat blazonry of shields. In that sense only they are not deep enough ; and lack another measurement. They are deep enough in the sense in which any beautiful picture is deep ; in the sense that anything beautiful always means more than it says ; possibly means more than it means to mean. In that sense there can be depth enough even in the shallow scenery of Skelt, when the child's eye plunges into it. But there is not depth in the sense of a great familiarity with the other side of the scenery or the

implied life behind the scenes. When all is said and done, the splendid and inspiring figure of Three-Fingered Jack is a figure and not a statue. You cannot walk round him; and if he has no more than three fingers, he has much less than three dimensions. But the important paradox is that in this the imperfection of the work is actually due to the perfection of the art. It is exactly because Balfour or Ballantrae only do what they are meant to do, and do it so swiftly and well, that we have a vague feeling that we do not know them as we know more loitering, more rambling or more sprawling characters. This is, if you will, a weakness in the author's work; but it is even more emphatically a weakness in the critics who call him weak. For they accuse him of the very opposite of his real fault; of a sort of self-indulgent delicacy or a luxury of mere words. The evil arises from his very passion of economy and severity; from the fact that he pruned too much, so as almost to kill the plant; from the fact that he went too straight to the point, so that the move-

ment was too quick to be clear, let alone familiar; above all, from the fact that such hardness of technique had about it something almost inhuman. He does sometimes simplify the puppet so much as to show the wire. But even in that relation between wire and wood there is a queer sort of realism.

Stevenson was a man who believed in craftsmanship; that is, in creation. He had not the smallest natural sympathy with all those hazy pagan and pantheistic notions often covered by the name of inspiration. He might not have expressed it in the phrase that man is an image of the Creator; but he did very definitely regard man as a maker of images. There is, and has long been, pouring upon the world, mostly in an immediate sense from the Germans and the Slavs, probably in an ultimate sense from the dark philosophies of Asia, a sort of doctrine of mystical helplessness that takes a hundred forms; and that recognises everything in the world except will. It denies the will of God and it does not believe even in the will of man. It does not believe in

one of the most glorious manifestations of the will of man, which is the act of creative choice essential to art. The tendency has been admirably treated in the work of M. Henri Massis in his book on the Defence of the West ; and another French writer of the same school, M. Maritain, has remarked on the important part which the word *artifex*, as the title of an artist, played in mediæval philosophy as well as mediæval craftsmanship. As we shall see later, it is the paradox of Stevenson that he would have cared nothing for such mediæval metaphysics ; and yet he carried out in practice precisely what these writers are now maintaining in principle. He was, if ever there was one, an *artifex* ; not a mere mouthpiece of elemental powers or destinies, but a man making something by the force of will and in the light of reason. It was a sort of craftsmanship characteristic of mediæval work in literature as well as sculpture. It was strikingly present in those mediæval poets whom Stevenson himself admired ; and perhaps admired more than he understood. It is supremely typical of the close

and finely carved ballades of Villon. Indeed the name of Stevenson will always, I suppose, be picturesquely associated with the name of Villon ; if only because of the fine macabre nocturne of *A Lodging for the Night*. And yet if there was one thing in the world about which Stevenson was entirely wrong, it was about François Villon. He was even, on that subject, guilty of a very unusual lapse of logic and error of fact. In his essay on Villon, while showing all the enthusiasm of a fine critic for a fine poet, he insists with almost rabid emphasis that the mind of the man was rotten with mere bestial cynicism and base materialism. 'His eyes were sealed with their own filth'; and he could see nothing noble or beautiful in heaven or earth. And to this he adds the rather curious remark that even in that France of the fifteenth century Villon might have learnt something better ; since a few years before Joan of Arc had lived one of the noblest lives in history. It seems rather hard on poor Villon to attribute to him a contented ignorance of all such people as Joan of Arc ; since he

actually goes out of his way to mention her in the most famous of his ballades; 'The good lady of Lorraine whom the English burnt at Rouen.' But the criticism is far more false according to the spirit than according to the letter. It is founded on a sort of modern fashionable fallacy, compounded of sentimentalism and optimism, to the effect that a man who is rather bitter about this world cannot have any ideals; whereas the bitterness does sometimes come from the intensity of his ideals. Anyhow, there is no doubt, to anybody who can read poetry without prejudice, that Villon had ideals and high ideals; only they happened to be highly Catholic ideals. The devotional poem that he wrote for his old mother, which describes her gazing at the glowing mediæval window, itself glows with sincerity. And he wrote at least one line that would be sufficient to destroy the accusation; one of those lines that are too simple to be adequately translated, 'Offrit à la mort sa très claire jeunesse'; which is something like, 'Offered his clear and shining youth to death.' He wrote

it of Jesus Christ; but what better thing could be written of Joan of Arc?

I have paused upon this parenthesis; because it foreshadows the general view to which all these rather rambling criticisms ultimately tend; that Stevenson stood for the truth and did not quite understand the truth he stood for. If he had understood it, he would have known that the virile craftsmanship which he was only too eager to admire in Villon, was really connected with certain virtues, which were none the less the virtues of a craftsman because they happened to be the virtues of a thief. Nobody pretends that Villon was a saint; but the socially disreputable externals of his sin do not (for those of his faith) make him a specially or supremely hopeless sinner. If he was a thief, nobody can prove that he was not a penitent thief; and the moral system to which he was attached had raised such a man to its altars under the somewhat paradoxical title of The Good Thief. He was probably the last man to expect in his own person to be that night in paradise; but he was not any further

off from heaven merely because he was likely to be hanged high on a gallows. Here we have once more, I fancy, a touch of Calvinism with its finger of fear. There is also that grim and stony optimism attributed to the Old Testament, with its divine favouritism for the fortunate. But though the surface of this rather superficial criticism was alien to that free will which is the creed of craftsmanship, the personal creative spirit underneath the criticism was still that of the genuine Christian craftsman. When Stevenson set about to describe Villon and his gang of ragamuffins, under the snow and gargoyles of mediæval Paris, he carved his grotesque as carefully as a gargoyle and balanced his story as beautifully as a French ballade. He did not take opium and absinthe and then sit down to wait for nameless cosmic energies to pour into his soul from nowhere. His spirit was a spirit utterly different from the mystical scepticism common in his time. He was responsible; he was deliberate; he was thrifty; he thoroughly deserved the dignified title of a working man.

The point here is that even his chief fault as an artist was typically the fault of a craftsman. He worked too narrowly, perhaps, producing only a thing perfect of its kind out of certain materials, by a certain method and under the limitations of a certain style. The same sort of criticism that feels a French ballade to be too fixed and artificial a form, the same sort of criticism that feels a fourteenth-century Virgin to be too stiff or affected in its posture, does doubtless feel a story of Stevenson to be too meagre in its materials or too strict in its stylistic unity. As I have explained above, I do not mean to suggest that such criticism is entirely unjust or unreasonable. Stevenson's work has its faults, like other good work; and its chief deficiency does appear in a certain defect of thinness, which is produced by this instinct for hard simplification. But nobody could adequately write a history of nineteenth-century literature without noting this important departure in the direction of a closer and more vigilant verbal choice, as compared either with the cheerful laxity that went

before it or the more gloomy laxity that has come since. Whatever else Stevenson stands for, he certainly stands for the idea that literature is not mere sensation or mere self-expression or mere record; but is sensation appealing to certain senses, self-expression in a certain material and record in a certain style. And in this he was certainly asserting the rights of the soul of man, as against various formless forces which some regarded as the soul of nature; the *anima mundi* of the pantheists. In this way Stevenson represented the same deep, ancient, hieratic and traditional truth that was taught to that generation by William Morris; and neither of them had the least idea what it was.

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF GESTURE

# CHAPTER IX

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF GESTURE

SOMETHING has been said, from time to time, in these pages about the justice or injustice of the alleged reaction against Stevenson. Little or nothing will be said about its final success or failure, and that for at least two reasons. First, that such guesses about the fashions of the future are generally quite wide of the mark, because they are founded on a very obvious fallacy. They always imply that public taste will continue to progress in its present direction; which is, in truth, the only thing we know that it will not do. A thing that wanders away in great winding curves may end anywhere; but to turn each curve into a straight line striking out into the void will be wrong in any case. This is obvious even in the tolerably short history of the modern novel. Victorians had a sort of parlour game of comparing Dickens and Thackeray; but they would have been amazed to hear

modern young people declaring that Thackeray is much more sentimental than Dickens. They would have been astounded by the revival of Trollope, accompanied by the comparative neglect of Thackeray. For to the more earnest Victorians of that world, Trollope was another name for triviality. They would have felt as we should feel if we were told that Charles Garvice would outlive John Galsworthy. For a great genius may appear in almost any disguise; even in the disguise of a successful novelist. The second reason for which I wave away from me the prophet's mantle, and decline to decide the question of the future, is that I do not think it very much matters. There are fine writers of the past as well as the present, who are read only by few; and I do not admit that the many know all about them, merely because they never knew them. I do not see why we should so blindly distrust popularity and so blindly trust posterity. But some of the conditions of survival may perhaps be generally considered.

The fame of Stevenson in the future will

stand or fall with the strength or weakness of a particular argument. It was perhaps most compactly expressed by a critic who accused him of 'externality.' What he called the fault of externality I should be inclined to ascribe to the fallacy of internalism. Perhaps it will be recognised better if I call it the fallacy of 'psychology.' It is the notion that a serious novelist should confine himself to the inside of the human skull. Now Stevenson's fiction is full of pantomime; in the strict sense of animated action or gesture. And it really seems as if the critics, by a sort of pun or perversion of meaning, associated it with a children's pantomime; though Stevenson would have been the last to object even to that. Anyhow, this idea that intellectual fiction should concern the solitary and uncommunicative intellect is a very obvious fallacy indeed. It is sound enough to say that we can see below the surface; but not that we cannot see what is on the surface. Least of all is it sensible to say that we cannot believe in it because it has come to the surface; though it were as enormous as

a spouting whale. Indeed the tone rather recalls that of some sceptics who implied that sailors ought not to think they saw the Great Sea Serpent, because it was a quarter of a mile long when they saw it. So we may well urge that psychological things are not less psychological because they come to the surface in pantomime. The argument amounts to saying that a really delicate piece of clockwork only exists when the clock stops. And indeed I suppose these critics would consider the action of a clock, in whirling its hands about, a very offensive piece of foreign gesticulation. It is like saying that a locomotive steam-engine is only a steam-engine when it is standing still; or that a building blowing up with a loud bang offers a final proof that it was not a powder-magazine.

Indeed in this respect the psychological critics are rather backward even in psychology. It generally distresses such people more to be behind the times than to be against the truth; and in this case it seems possible that they are both. The objection to their fallacy of internalism

is that it is nonsense to think only of thoughts and not of words or deeds, since words are only spoken thoughts and deeds are only acted words. They are in fact the most dominant words and the most triumphant thoughts; the thoughts that emerge. But, according to 'the latest modern psychology' (that infallible and immutable authority), it is even more of a mistake to treat the surface so superficially. Acts are not only the swiftest thoughts; they are even too swift to be called thoughts. They come from something more fundamental than common or conscious thinking. It is exactly our subconsciousness that appears in acts more than in words, or even thoughts. It is precisely our subconsciousness that bites its nails or twirls its moustaches, that kicks its heels or grinds its teeth. According to some, it is even our subconsciousness (that jolly companion) that occasionally cuts our mother's throat or picks our father's pocket. I do not take the latest modern psychology quite so seriously; but what element of truth there is in it is all against the tone of the

latest Stevensonian, or Anti-Stevensonian, criticism. The test of fine fiction, by this or any other standard, is not whether it follows out threads of thought in silence; not whether it is subjective rather than objective or avoids any violent issue in events. It is simply whether it is right; whether the psychology is right and whether the act represents it rightly. In psychology, as in any other science, one cannot be more than right. And the most embittered critic will find it very difficult to show that Stevenson was very often wrong. What the embittered critic can show, and what will make him still more embittered, is that Stevenson expressed everything by some dramatic act. And, according to such critics, anything that is dramatic is melodramatic. The boyish brooding and smarting sentimental self-importance of David Balfour during his one quarrel with Alan Breck Stewart are described so delicately and exactly as to be worthy of George Meredith, who was so excellent with boys; they might easily be the broodings of Evan Harrington or Harry Richmond. Only in Stevenson's

story they end (alas !) in the crossing of blades and Alan tossing away his sword ; and that, of course, is dreadfully melodramatic. One cannot be psychological inside a sword-belt ; and cerebral processes must not take place under a three-cornered hat. The interlude of Henry Durie's crippled and almost half-witted happiness, when the shadow of his brother is withdrawn for a season and his child is growing in the sun, is as pathetic and as true as any lucid interval (if such there be) in the suburban depression of the school of Gissing. Only when the fool's paradise is lost, by a random word about the possible perversion of the child, it is not to be denied that Henry Durie falls to the earth like a stone. And the thoughtful critic explains that such a man cannot have had any really internal feelings ; because his internal feelings were strong enough to knock him down. The dark, drudging and almost automatic altruism of poor Herrick, amid all his tangle of treasons in *The Ebb-Tide*, is as sad and true as the most miserable modern could wish it to be. But then Herrick jumps

into the sea with a great splash; though he ought to endear himself to the modern critic by not actually doing anything after all, even for the fruitful cult of suicide. The girl Kirstie's 'gabble' of recollection and daydream and imaginary lovers' quarrels, as she goes home from church, is quite as true to the actual inner workings of the young sentimental mind as any feminine fine shade in Henry James. But then the critic cannot be expected to forgive her for giving two or three little skips as she walks along the road. No lady in Henry James ever skipped. It is because in each of these cases some outward motion makes memorable the inward mood that these critics feel that it cannot really be so very inward. It is to be noted that they do not commit themselves to a positive negation; they do not affirm that the characters in question would *not* feel as they are described as feeling; they do not even say that they would not act as they are described as acting; that David would not fight or Durie fall or Kirstie leap upon the road. They simply have a refined and delicate

feeling that psychological fiction ought to deal only, or mostly, with unspoken words or uncompleted thoughts. That is a very interesting point of view; and it is just as well to have it clearly stated and understood. If Stevenson had only served as an excuse for expounding this interesting critical thesis, they might so far thank him and even constrain themselves to be reasonably polite to him. Anyhow, that seems to be their principle; and I have paused long enough upon it to show that I do not wish to ignore it. Only I would respectfully submit that their quarrel is not with Stevenson; certainly their quarrel is not merely with Stevenson. It is with Homer and the bending of the bow; it is with Hamlet and the leap into the grave; it is with Francesca dropping the book or Quixote driving at the windmill; it is with Henry putting on his crown or Anthony putting off his helmet; it is with Roland in Roncesvaux, blowing the horn and breaking the sword and holding up his glove to God. It is in all those epic energies which gave to the last story and its sequel the

noble title of Songs of Action—*Chansons de Geste.*

Among the many unreasonable objections to the Stevensonian romance, I admit that there is a reasonable objection that may be advanced here. It may be said that he was guilty of externality in this sense; that he sometimes began with externals, in so far as he saw in some scene or other setting the suggestion or rather the provocation of romance. 'Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder,' he very truly observed; and he was often moved to commit the murder in a vicarious literary manner. He wished sometimes, he said, to fit every such place with its appropriate legend. Superficially there is sense in this objection; but in a deeper and more sympathetic sense I do not admit that it contradicts what I have said of the deep spring of gesture or the deliberation of craftsmanship. It merely means that there was from the first, in any such work of art, the unity of mood that there always ought to be. It means that he had decided what sort of novel he would write, before he had decided what

novel he would write; and this is right and inevitable. The dank garden cannot cry aloud immediately, in so many words, 'In this place the sinister tutor with one eye larger than the other buried the old sailor's cutlass with which he had killed the horribly but secretly wicked admiral who was really his brother.' No dank garden ever expressed itself with such accuracy when crying aloud to anybody; but it is none the less true that the exact shade of gloom and the exact outline of disorder may have suggested, not merely a vulgar murder, but a murder having certain special qualities of the unnatural or the strange. This does not prove that they were not *deep* feelings which thus rose up at the sight of the strange landscape and groped to find their appropriate images of doom. It only proves that the origin of the story was of the same sort as the origin of a poem. We can call Stevenson a prose poet, if we like; but we cannot call him a superficial writer, unless all poets are superficial.

I shall have occasion to remark elsewhere that there is one strictly technical

sense in which Stevenson's treatment can be called a thin or a flat treatment. It is a sense in which we might say that a certain style in decorative ironwork is light and slender, in which we might say that Whistler's way of laying on monochrome washes was merely flat. It has its defects, even considered as a technical treatment; there is an artistic aversion to filigree; and many have maintained that Whistler's washes were too washy. But it is essential that this criticism should not be confused with the suggestion I have just answered; the suggestion that the spiritual significance of the pattern or the picture is shallow and not deep. That is another matter and has nothing whatever to do with the question of our favourite form; and though Stevenson's favourite form was sometimes picturesque to excess, there was nothing platitudinous or merely sentimental about the moral of the picture. On the contrary, he was very much drawn towards difficult and perplexing moral themes and liked to put puzzles to himself in the possible relations of human souls. Only, as we have seen,

he liked to make the human soul come to a conclusion in some fashion and announce its conclusion in some way. Hence all the abrupt signals and bodily departures which the sensitive so much lament; hence the coin hurled through the windowpane at Durrisdeer; the banjo flung into the fire on Midway Island; the knife sticking in the mast or the diamond tossed into the river. In short, Stevenson's stories were often problem stories, in the style of what were called problem plays. But by one crime he disqualified himself for the company of the really realistic and earnest authors of problem plays or problem novels. He had a weakness for solving the problem.

There is in this merit the other side of a fault; and a fault of which he has often been accused. He was called self-conscious; and in his work he was perhaps a little too self-conscious, as compared with some writers whose fundamental and even almost forgotten impulses were allowed to flow forth more freely, and perhaps more naturally. But these things are a matter of degree and balance; and

some may hold that it is the opposite type that has now become unbalanced. Walking the world to-day, I am not sure that I do not prefer the self-conscious to the subconscious. Stevenson felt a responsibility in art which was like his vivid and almost morbid sense of responsibility in conduct. His problems of conduct were indeed sometimes a little anarchical; and his ethical decision in them perhaps a little amateurish. Like Ibsen and Bernard Shaw and many men of his time, he had not quite discovered the pressing practical necessity of having a general rule, in the absence of which the world becomes a welter of exceptions. But he was intensely interested in the right moral solution whatever it might be; even if it seemed to involve the inversion of a moral rule. And this sense of social responsibility was thoroughly sincere; even when the special pleading had to be, perhaps, a little too individual to be social. It was natural for a novelist, perhaps, to feel most fiercely and keenly the particular personal case. Anyhow, I think he generally did so; as did Loudon

Dodd in *The Wrecker*, when he balanced opium and Jim. He was certainly vastly intrigued by that sort of problem. Henley called him a Catechist; but he should have said Casuist. He professed to have a defective sympathy with Catholicism; and he was still probably provincial enough to have had a horror of Jesuitry; but as a matter of fact he was more casuistical than any Jesuit. He was much less clear about the original universal dogmas of a catechism, whether it were the Shorter Catechism or the Penny Catechism. But he was much more closely concerned about the special occasion when the general sense of those doctrines seemed challenged by a special necessity. We may say, therefore, that, in life and in literature, he was essentially a conscientious person. And a conscientious person is presumably a conscious person; and sometimes perhaps a self-conscious person. He committed a great many crimes vicariously in his books; and delivered batches of corpses to his publishers in the style required of all writers of sensational romance. But his deaths

had the delicacy and fine distinction of murder; and nothing of the vulgar communism of massacre. In the one episode in his stories that might be called a massacre, the butchery of the old crew of *The Flying Scud* by Wicks and his men, the whole horror of the incident is in its intense individualism. It is in the fact that the men have to be slain one by one; in the fact that the massacre is not a massacre but a series of murders. He went so far, in his correspondence, as to say cheerfully of Henry Durie's bloody trap for his brother that it is 'a perfectly cold-blooded murder of which I expect and intend the reader to approve.' But even here it will be noted that he intended something, and said so; seeming almost as cold-blooded as the murderer. But at least he did not commit murders without knowing it, in the manner of our more subconscious criminals and maniacs in modern fiction. He was not in sympathy with those more recent heroes who seem to seduce and betray and even stab in a sort of prolonged fit of absence of mind. There had not been established, for him

or for his characters, that convenient back-stairs of unconscious mind or automatic motion, by which something that is not ourselves (and makes for unrighteousness) may escape from the cellar into the street. It was perhaps a defect; but in the whole of his life and work there is a complete absence of absence of mind.

And with this matter of responsibility, and the reliance on the will in moral matters, we come to that larger question to be considered in the last chapter. It will be in a sense a summary of what has already been said; and yet it will be necessary to say it somewhat more plainly, and in relation to large matters about which many modern people are rather too confused or too timid to talk plain. For the moment it need only be said that the importance of Stevenson largely consists in his relation with the tendency of his age. That tendency was towards a certain mysticism of materialism, of which the most dogmatic expression is what is called monism; but which can be more lightly expressed in a hundred forms, as that all life is one, or that everything is heredity

and environment, or that the impersonal is higher than the personal, or that men live by the herd instinct or the soul of the hive. Our fathers called the general atmosphere fatalism ; but it has now any number of more idealistic names. Stevenson felt all this, without exactly defining it ; he felt it in the realism of nineteenth-century literature, in the pessimism of contemporary poetry, in the timidity of hygienic precaution, in the smugness of middle-class uniformity. And while he was entirely of that time and society, while he read all the realists, knew all the artists, doubted with the doubters and even denied with the deniers, he had that within him which could not but break out in a sort of passionate protest for more personal and poetical things. He flung out his arms with a wide and blind gesture, as one who would find wings at the moment when the world sank beneath him.

# THE MORAL OF STEVENSON

# CHAPTER X

## THE MORAL OF STEVENSON

EVEN those unfortunates for whom the tale of *Treasure Island*, and the tradition continued in the pirates of *Peter Pan*, form an episode that is ended, may still be asked to consider it as an episode; to consider it, or perhaps to reconsider it. Even those who hardly feel it as a piece of literature will be forced at least to accept it as a piece of history. I am not one of these dismal and disinherited persons, as the reader has perhaps by this time darkly suspected; but I am quite content for the moment to put aside the question of whether their lack of appreciation is due to the advance of literary experiment or the decline of literary taste. I ask them for the moment to consider it not as a literary masterpiece, but merely as a curiosity of literature. I ask them to pause upon the episode of the Stevensonian Buccaneers, much as they might pause upon the episode of the real Buc-

caneers; upon some quaint old volume about the real lives of Blackbeard and Henry Morgan. Just as there would always be some historical interest in considering how the pirate sack of Panama was related to the great affairs of the Spanish Empire or the English Navy, so there is always some philosophical interest in considering how Stevenson's romanticism was related to realism and rationalism and all the great movements of the nineteenth century. In short, I am content for the moment if all that wonderful library of books is lumped together under the name of one of the least of them; and considered as a Footnote to History.

What was the historical meaning then of that strange splash of crimson lake on the drab age of Gissing and Howells; like a burlesque bloodstain in a detective story? To begin with, I foresee that in having stated the matter thus historically, I have laid myself open to some criticisms of the strictly historical sort. It may be said that the dates and details of Stevenson's life and time do not correspond with such a comparison; that he came too early in

the Victorian progress to be really a type of the 'nineties; and that his real rivals or models were the Victorian Philistines. I do not admit this as a truth, even where I might admit part of it as a fact. An anachronism is often simply an ellipsis; and an ellipsis is often simply a necessity. The thing that a living intelligence like that of Stevenson feels is not the stale and static conventions of his world, but the way the world is going. We talk familiarly of time and tide; and, in a case like this, it is idle to remember a time without realising that it was a tide. The author of *The Ebb-Tide* knew well enough what tide was at that moment ebbing. It was the tide of what many regarded as Victorian virtue and all the happiness described in the three-volume novel. Stevenson knew very well that this stuffy sort of stuff was not the strong menace or promise of the coming time. He sometimes pokes fun at the Philistines; but he thrusts with furious energy at the Æsthetes. Compare for instance the way in which he speaks of Walter Besant with the way in which he speaks of Henry

James, when he has to differ from them both, in that admirable letter about 'art competing with life.' He dismisses the successful novelist as representing something that had already failed; but he takes seriously the serious novelist, and is obviously afraid that in the long run his more subtle methods may succeed. Those more subtle methods, of the impressionists and realists and the rest, were obviously for him the real danger because they were the rising tide. In short, it may be complained that I have represented Stevenson as reacting against decadence before it existed. And I answer that this is the only real way in which a fighting man ever does successfully attack a movement; when he attacks later, he attacks too late.

Or again, it may be said that I exaggerate the novelty of work like that of *Treasure Island*; and that it was but a natural continuation of the historical novel of Scott or the nautical novel of Marryat. Here again I think the critic will not only miss a fine distinction, but a very sharp point. The old novels were novels; they were not boys' stories, but simply stories.

The comedy of the Oldbucks and Osbaldistones is as much a solid comedy of character as that of Mr. Bennett or Miss Bates. It is only Scott's incurable and almost unconscious sense of romance that sends the comedy characters to the dangerous cliff or to the Clachan of Aberfoyle. There was no deliberate and defiant return to juvenile art out of season, such as that which is flaunted in Stevenson's letters as well as in Stevenson's story. The point can be best illustrated once more by the memory of Skelt's Juvenile Drama. It is one thing to say that a painter like Maclise or an actor like Macready may have had a style that would strike us as stagey and pompous. Maclise and Macready did not themselves think that they were stagey and pompous. It would be quite another thing to revive the actual figures of the old toy theatre, almost (in a sense) *because* they were stagey and pompous. Stevenson obviously resurrected all this romance, not because it was the fashion of his time, like the historical painting of Maclise, but because it was *against* the growing fashion of his time; and had to be fought for as

a new fashion because it was really an old fashion. He glorified an antiquated Skeltery, when he knew it was antiquated. He concentrated on a certain type of book for boys, when he knew it had long been abandoned to boys. He is often called self-conscious; and in this sense he was very self-conscious. He was as self-consciously copying an old piratical penny dreadful as the Pre-Raphaelites were self-consciously copying an old mediæval religious picture. As they were carefully inlaying it with jewels of childlike colour, he was carefully resetting the lost jewel of his own childhood. But he knew he was not merely fashionable, just as he knew that he was not really five years old.

What then exactly did he mean? What, so to speak, did *it* mean; even if in a sense he did not mean it; or at least, did not mean to mean it? First of all it was, I think, a sort of dash for liberty; and especially a dash for happiness. It was a defence of the possibility of happiness; and a kind of answer to the question, 'Can a man be happy?' But it was an answer of a curious kind, defiantly

delivered in rather curious circumstances. It was the escape of a prisoner as he was led in chains from the prison of Puritanism to the prison of Pessimism. Few have understood that passage in the history of the manufacturing civilisation of north-west Europe and America. Few have realised that the gloomier sort of modern materialism often came upon a class that was only just escaping from an equally gloomy sort of spirituality. They had hardly come out of the shadow of Calvin when they came into the shadow of Schopenhauer. From the world of the worm that dieth not, they passed into a world of men dying like worms; and in the case of some of the decadents, almost exulting in being devoured by worms like Herod. Puritanism and pessimism, in short, were prisons that stood near together; and none have ever counted how many left one only for the other; or under what a covered way they passed. Stevenson's escapade was an escape; a sort of runaway romantic evasion for the purpose of escaping both. And as a fugitive has often fled and hidden in his

mother's house, this outlaw took refuge in his old home; barricaded himself in the nursery and almost tried to creep into the dolls'-house. And he did it upon a kind of instinct, that here had dwelt definite pleasures which the Puritan could not forbid nor the pessimist deny. But it was a strange story. He had his answer to the question, 'Can a man be happy?'; and it was, 'Yes, before he grows to be a man.'

It is only the obvious things that are never seen; and a thing is often counted stale merely because men have been staring at it so long without seeing it. There is nothing harder to bring within a small and clear compass than generalisations about history, or even about humanity. But there is one especially evident and yet elusive in this matter of happiness. When men pause in the pursuit of happiness, seriously to picture happiness, they have always made what may be called a 'primitive' picture. Men rush towards complexity; but they yearn towards simplicity. They try to be kings; but they dream of being shepherds. This is

equally true whether they look back to a Golden Age or look forward to the most modern Utopia. The Golden Age is always imagined as an age free from the curse of gold. The perfect civilisation of the future is always something which many would call the higher savagery; and is conceived in the spirit that spoke of 'Civilisation, its Cause and Cure.' Whether it is Arcadia of the past or Utopia of the future, it is always something simpler than the present. From the Greek or Roman poet yearning for the peace of pastoral life to the last sociologist explaining the ideal social life, this sense of a return and a resolution into elemental things is apparent. The pipe of the shepherd is always something rather plainer than the lyre of the poet; and the ideal social life is some more or less subtle form of the simple life. Of this tendency there is yet a third and perhaps a truer expression. It may be remarked that these daydreams of happiness concern rather the dawn than the day. The reactionary wishes to return to what he would call 'the morning of the world.'

But the revolutionist is quite equally prone to talk about waiting for the day-break, about songs before sunrise, and about the dawn of a happier day. He does not seem to think so much about the noon of that day. And one mode in which this morning spirit is expressed is the return to the child.

Stevenson might have been asking his question a hundred years before, at the time of the first humanitarian revolt against the Puritans; when the same city of Geneva, that had seen Calvin found the religion of pessimism, saw Rousseau found the religion of optimism. If he had been in that first liberal or naturalistic movement, he would probably have felt that the best expression of the romantic movement was in the fulfilment of romantic love. Paul and Virginia, instead of Poll and Robinson Crusoe (not to mention Long John Silver), would have been the happy inhabitants of the desert island. In that honeymoon of humanity, it would have seemed quite enough that Edwin and Angelina united at last (by a dignified civil marriage by the Registrar of the

Republic) would populate the world with pure and happy republicans. But that eighteenth-century Arcadia had clouded over long before Stevenson's time; and indeed he was prone to be a little too cloudy even about those of its principles which are really clear. And while the more Bohemian artists of the later time continued to claim all the liberties and more than the laxities of such a theory, they had left off pretending that it led to such felicity in practice. Indeed there has been a curious irony in this respect about the modern artists, especially the literary artists. Half the outcry against them arose, rightly or wrongly, because they insisted that their books must be repulsive in order to be realistic or sordid in order to be true. They insisted on a free hand in describing sex; and seemed to assume, in their own apologia, that to describe sex is to describe sin—and sorrow. They insisted that anything pretty must be a pretence; and never saw how sharply they were reflecting on the end of that very dance of pretty nymphs and cupids, which had brought them the licence that

they liked best. In short, they seemed to make two claims; first to be free to find the perfect happiness of passion; and second, to be free to describe how exceedingly unhappy it is. In life one might do anything to follow love, because it was so very beautiful; and in art one must do anything to describe love, because it was so abominably ugly. Their own anarchical doctrines were really contradicted by their own anarchical descriptions. The house of love, in which it was necessary to take out such hospital licences for amputation and vivisection, could hardly be (as the poet said) the house of fulfilment of craving. It was certainly not the house that Rousseau and the old romantic liberals had craved. Anyhow, it was not possible for a man of Stevenson's generation to look for this light and lucid happiness in sex, or in that sense even in sentiment. It was not possible for a romantic who, perhaps born out of his due time, was living not in the age of Rousseau but in the age of Zola. Thus we find in Stevenson something like an actual avoidance of those themes of

passion, that were throbbing in the new fiction all around him; an avoidance even of that normal romantic love, which is not touched at all in *Kidnapped* and touched gracefully but still lightly even in *Catriona*. It was not only that girls interfere with adventures. It was not only that he could not be one of those for whom a girl is the only adventure. It was also because a man living under the harsh challenge of the new realism could no longer pretend that it was an adventure which always ended well. He wished to escape into a world of more secure pleasure and perhaps of less potential pain. And this is connected with very profound truths of psychology, which have not yet been properly explored. But most men know that there is a difference between the intense momentary emotion called up by memory of the loves of youth, and the yet more instantaneous but more perfect pleasure of the memory of childhood. The former is always narrow and individual, piercing the heart like a rapier; but the latter is like a flash of lightning, for one split second revealing a whole varied land-

scape ; it is not the memory of a particular pleasure any more than of a particular pain, but of a whole world that shone with wonder. The first is only a lover remembering love ; the second is like a dead man remembering life.

I once heard in a railway-train a farmer's family of the Puritan sort discussing with a Nonconformist minister the action of a boy, at the front in the Great War, who had occupied himself in hospital with carving a wooden cross and sent it home to his family. His family was pained but apologetic. Their remarks had a continual chorus of, 'He didn't mean anything by it.' This extraordinary state of mind intrigued me so much that I listened to the rest of the conversation ; at intervals of which the minister repeated firmly that we didn't want that sort of thing ; what we wanted was a living Christ. And it never seemed to occur to this reverend gentleman that he was at that moment at war with every living as well as every Christian thing ; with the creative instinct, with the desire for form, with the love of family, with the impulse to send signals

and messages, with humour, with pathos, with the virility of martyrdom and the vividness of exile. It was in truth the carver of the cross who was bearing witness to a living Christ and the partisan of a living Christ who was repeating a dead form. It was none the less so, because it was not a fixed shape in wood, but only a fixed shape in words. This curious incident has always remained in my memory, however, if only for its fresh and superficial humour. The image of the unconscious youth who didn't mean anything by it, who merely whittled a stick until it came by sheer ill-luck into the form of a cross, will always be a source of fruitful entertainment to the mind. The idea of the young man hacking wood about right and left in a reckless manner, and seeing theological symbols spring up on every side in spite of his most earnest efforts, has something in it of the fairy-tale. And the idea that if he had only known what was coming, nothing would have induced him to touch anything so improper and shocking, is a matter of deep indwelling joy.

And yet, strangely enough, I must in a manner apologise to the poor minister and admit that something like that fantastic suggestion may really occur. After all, there is in the world a great crowd of unconscious cross-builders or unintentional crosses. There is, running through the very framework of our houses and our furniture, a sort of pattern of crosses. There are a great many honest carpenters and joiners who make wooden crosses and don't mean anything by it. But the figure means something for all that; precisely because it is a fundamental figure, based on basic principles of balance and conflict and support. All our chairs and tables are full of crosses, of cross-bars and cross-beams; and it is probable that most of us use the furniture without feeling the significance; do not think of a table as the condition of a communion table and can sit on a chair without immediately speaking *ex cathedra*. And in the same fashion, the more we study active and artistic history, the more often we shall see men making thrones when they meant only to make chairs or

building churches when they meant only to build houses. And in the retrospect of religious history, it seems to me that most excursions and even aberrations have only served to scrawl on a larger scale the truth of certain ancient doctrines near and necessary to man; and illustrate orthodoxy if only with awful examples. Milton was himself an example; for he told more truth than he intended, when he said that new Presbyter was but old Priest writ large. It was indeed the human need of a priest written large; and it was written very large indeed.

Now the men of Stevenson's generation, and especially the men who were as intelligent as he was, were perhaps more unconscious of the real case for these old ideas than any men who have lived before or since. Nothing was further from their thoughts than the suggestion that their artistic fancies could refer back to those antiquated and sombre dogmas about the Fall or the obscuration of the divine light by sin. Wordsworth, though he is sometimes called pantheistic, saw in the vivid pleasures of childhood what he called

intimations of immortality. Stevenson admitted that he often found it difficult to get any intimations of immortality. And yet, if he could bear no witness to the Resurrection, he was continually bearing witness to the Fall. We say lightly enough of a good man that he is a Christian without knowing it. But Stevenson was a Christian theologian without knowing it. Nothing, as I say, would have surprised him or his generation more than to discover it; and it may be that some even of a younger generation are so traditional as to have missed the gradual unfolding of the truth. He would have been the first to say that such dogmas were dead and that we cannot put back the clock to the fifth century. Yet he did not explain why he was so often trying to put back his own clock to his fifth year. For the truth is that there really is no sense or meaning, in this continuous tribute of the poets to the poetry of early childhood, unless it be, as Treherne says, that the world of sin comes between us and something more beautiful or, as Wordsworth says, that we came first from

God who is our home. I will not pause to distinguish here between the true doctrine of the Fall and the doctrine of depravity which the Calvinists had probably taught to Stevenson, which would alone be enough to explain his not knowing how orthodox he was. Nor will I here expound the distinction between original and acted sin, apart from the ideal of infant baptism ; or the already bewildered modern sceptic would probably think I was mad. He must accept my benevolent assurance that it is rather he that is mad ; or rather, through no fault of his own, mentally defective. The point is that there really is no explanation of this intense imaginative concentration on babies except a mystical explanation. The whole point of Stevenson's story is that of a man haunted by a tune, always seeking for the broken notes of a lost melody ; which he himself called the note of the time-devouring nightingale. 'But only children hear it right.' Why ?

Moreover, as I have already noted, this principle of the beatific vision of innocence was even more proved in the breach than

in the observance. The rationalists and realists who were praising the adult pursuit of happiness, or ought to have been praising such a pursuit of happiness, were (and still are) mainly occupied with describing unhappiness. They only prove that free life and free love are really worse than any ascetic had ever represented them. The naturalistic philosophies did not only contradict Christianity. The naturalistic philosophies also contradicted the naturalistic novels. Their own exercise of their own right of expression was quite enough to show that the mere combination of the maturity of reason with the pleasures of passion does not in fact produce a Utopia. We need not debate here whether the Zolaists were justified in so laboriously describing horrors. If mere liberty had really led to happiness, they would have been describing happiness. It would not have been necessary for a grown man with a library of modern literature to hide himself in a twopenny toy theatre in order to be happy.

This very simple truth is probably too simple to be seen; because, like many

such things, it is too large to be seen. But certainly it is still there to be seen, if any of the moderns could enlarge their minds enough to see it. The type of realism has changed since the days of Zola, just as the type of romance has changed since the days of Stevenson. But it has not answered this unanswerable distinction between the cheerful songs of innocence and the melancholy songs of experience. Of the recent literature of the rising generation, there is much that is frivolous, but uncommonly little that is joyous. Just now we are incessantly asked to rejoice in the sight of youth enjoying itself; which I for one am very ready to do; but all the readier if I can be quite certain that it is enjoying itself. And it is a curious fact that in its characteristic contemporary literature there is an almost complete absence of joy. And I think it would be true to say, in a general fashion, that it is not childish enough to be cheerful. In this connection I may be allowed once more to be at once anecdotal and allegorical. When I first saw the title of *The Green Hat* I pictured it as the top-

hat of an old gentleman who had a fancy for that colour. I imagined him a strutting symbolic figure of springtime, with hair like the hawthorn and a hat like the new leaves; my mind lost itself amid tree-tops and all the antics of the April wind; I imagined him chasing his hat to elfland and the end of the world, or climbing trees to find the blue bird nesting in the green headgear. The mere idea of a green hat gave me a glimpse into that elusive element of which the blue bird was made the emblem. When I opened the book and found that the green hat was only a lady's hat, and that the book was full of sentiments about sex, I was as blankly disappointed as a boy who has been given a dictionary instead of a book. My feelings towards the intrusive females were those of Jim Hawkins; much what he would have felt if a fashionable lady had dissuaded Squire Trelawney from going to sea. It is true that the people in the book professed to be enjoying themselves, in what appeared to be their own fashion; but they could not help me to enjoy myself, as I should have done with the

only true, real and original story of the green hat. I recognised that there was wit in the work, but no fun in it; there was no stir of that deep gale of spring; but rather an accepted air of autumn; of things dancing as dead leaves dance; like the Falling Leaves in the joyful revelation of Mr. Aldous Huxley. I know all about the defence of this gloomy realism on the ground that it is real. I have known it ever since the time of Stevenson writing on Zola. But I am not talking about whether this literature is reasonable or justifiable; I am talking about whether it does in fact call up, or even try to call up, the passion of positive joy.

That is why this episode is worth noting and recalling if only as an episode; and all the more so, if it is in sharp contrast with the episodes that follow as well as the episodes that went before. I have admitted that some part of Stevenson's deliberate choice of childishness was a reaction from ill-chosen surroundings and courses of conduct in the period of passion and of youth. But the younger writers, who boast of choosing for themselves,

seem just as unsuccessful in making passion identical with pleasure; and just as unsuccessful in preserving the youthful spirit of youth. I have admitted that when he made his dash for liberty and happiness, it may have appeared that there was no other alternative but that of Puritanism or pessimism. But the new writers who are not threatened with Puritanism seem to be just as much moved to pessimism. There seems no explanation of the two tempers; except that the apostle of childhood was at least seeking pleasure where it could be found, while the apostles of youth are seeking it where it cannot be found. What awaits us after all these episodes I will not pretend to prophesy; I will only profess to hope that it may be the rebuilding of the great and neglected Christian philosophy, to which all contributions will be thankfully received, especially those of atheists and anarchists. And that is really the chief importance, both of the man who can show human nature happy in the nursery and the man who can only show it unhappy in the night-club. Both of them

may be, and generally are, of the sort that would smile scornfully at the thought of calling up the old pious fables about heaven and hell. But in fact Stevenson was describing the kingdom of heaven and calling it Skelt; while Zola was describing all the kingdoms of hell and calling it real life. Neither of them get outside the iron ring of the real truth of the matter; that the one thing, however babyish, really is a picture of contentment, while in the other the only decent element is discontent.

It may be that the world will forget Stevenson, a century or so after it has forgotten all the present distinguished detractors of Stevenson. It may be quite the other way, as the poet said; it may be the world will remember Stevenson; will remember him with a start, so to speak, when everybody else has forgotten that there ever was any story in a novel. The dissolution hinted at by Sir Edmund Gosse, whereby fiction which was always a rather vague form shall become utterly formless, may have by that time dropped out of the novel all its original notion of

a narrative. Mr. H. G. Wells, if he lives to delight the world so long, will be able to deliver the goods in the form of great masses of admirable analyses of economics and social conditions, without the embarrassment of having to remember at every two hundred pages or so that he has somewhere left a hero in a motor-car or a heroine in a lodging-house. Miss Dorothy Richardson may pour out those vivid inventories of the furniture and family crockery, which her subconscious self notes with the accuracy of an inventory clerk, without being pestered to tell us who owned these objects, or what was the object of owning them. The psychologists may present us with a series of subtle and fascinating states of mind, without our being morbidly curious to enquire whose mind. They in turn may yield to some other school; such as those bright and breezy Americans who call themselves Behaviourists. They declare with some warmth that there is really nothing in their minds and that they only think with their muscles; which, in the case of some thinking, we might well believe. At

present the Behaviourists are on their best behaviour. But there seems no reason why this new sort of muscular Christianity should not eventually invade the novel, just as psychoanalysis did; and we shall all be able to rejoice in a new type of fiction, in which a bright thought flashes through Edwin's biceps or a vivid memory rises unbidden in the deltoid of Angelina. For it is the habit of modern psychological science to make quite sure of its fiction a long time before it is sure of its facts. But the trouble about such fiction will be that it is very much of a novelty, but not much of a novel. The passion for making patterns of loops and spirals, like a chart of currents at sea, has so far dissolved the outline of individuality that we lose all sense of what a man is, let alone what a man wants. Nameless universal forces streaming through the subconsciousness, run very truly like that dark and sacred river that wound its way through caverns measureless to man. When this process of shapelessness is complete, it is always possible that men may come upon a shape

with something of a sharp surprise; like a geologist finding in featureless rocks the fossil of some wild creature, looking as if petrified in the last wild leap or on the wing. Or it is as if an antiquary, passing through halls and temples of some iconoclastic city, covered with dizzy patterns of merely mathematical beauty, were to come upon the heaving limb or lifted shoulder of some broken statue of the Greeks. In that condition it may be that the novel will again be novel. And in that condition, in that reaction, certainly no novel will serve its purpose so forcibly, or make its point so plainly, as a novel by Stevenson. The story, the first of childish and the oldest of human pleasures, will nowhere reveal its structure and its end so swiftly and simply as in the tales of Tusitala. The world's great age will in that degree begin anew; the childhood of the earth be rediscovered; for the story-teller will once more have spread his carpet in the dust; and it will really be a magic carpet.

But whether or no the world returns thus to Stevenson, whether or no it

returns thus to stories, it will certainly return to something; and to something of this kind. The only thing which we can safely prophesy is the one thing which is always called impossible. Again and again we are told, by all sorts of priggish and progressive persons, that mankind cannot go back. The answer is that if mankind cannot go back, it cannot go anywhere. Every important change in history has been founded on something historic: and if the world had not again and again tried to renew its youth, it would have been dead long ago. As the poet makes his songs out of memories of first love, or the writer of fairy-tales has to play at being a child as the child plays at being a man, so every republican has looked back to the remote republics of antiquity and even the Communist talks about a primitive community of goods. The sharp return to simplicity, as the expression of the fiery thirst for happiness—that is the one recurring fact of all history; and that is the importance of Stevenson's place in literary history. Nor is there the smallest reason to suppose

that the literary history of the future will in this respect be any different from the literary history of the past. On the contrary, the two or three examples of extreme change, with which the most recent days have challenged us, have very curiously confirmed this old truth in a new way. Of that it is indeed true to say that the more it changes, the more it is the same thing; and a jolly good thing too.

Fashions change; but this return to the nursery is not a fashion and it does not change. If we turn to the very latest, and we might say loudest, of literary innovators, we still find that in so far as they are saying anything, they are saying that. Let us suppose that the Stevensonian way of doing it is altogether dated and out of date; let us leave Stevenson behind in the dead past, along with such lumber as Cervantes and Balzac and Charles Dickens. If we shoot forward into the most fashionable fads and fancies, if we rush to the newest salons or listen to the most advanced lectures, we do not escape the challenge of our childhood.

There is already a group, we might say a family group, of poets who consider themselves, and are generally considered, the last word in experiment and even extravagance; and who are not without real qualities of deep atmosphere and suggestion. Yet all that is really deep in the best of their work comes out of those depths of garden perspective and large rooms as seen by little children, white with the windows of the morning. The best poetry of Miss Sitwell is after all a sort of parody of *A Child's Garden of Verses*, decked with slightly altered adjectives that would mildly surprise the child. But the poet is as certainly groping after her own lost shadow as the child who 'rose and found the shining dew on every buttercup'; and is even more ready to idealise the moving cloud of the crinoline than he who was content to say, 'Whenever Aunty moves around, her dresses make a curious sound.' In Miss Sitwell's version they would make a still more curious sound, the nature of which I have not the courage to conjecture. The shining dew might become the shrieking dew, or

on a more moderate estimate the sniggering dew; but it would still be a long-lost child who stood bewildered in those grey meadows before the dawn. Many have complained, and perhaps justly, of the almost American modernity of the artistic ambition of these artists. They announce their message through a megaphone; they shout it through pantomime masks; they hustle and push and pick quarrels; but there is something in them, for all their efforts to advertise—or to hide it. And that something is the new form of the reaction of Stevenson; exactly as Stevenson was the new form of the reaction of Rousseau. Many have speculated on what they are really after; but what they are really after is still the same: those lost children who are themselves; lost in the deep gardens at dusk.

That is why the real story of Stevenson must end where it began; because it was to that end that he himself perpetually wandered and strove. I said at the beginning that the key to his career was put early into his hands; it was well symbolised by the paint-brush dipped in purple

or prussian blue, with which he started to colour the stiff caricatures upon the cardboard of Skelt. But that paint-brush has been in other hands besides his; I remarked elsewhere that, dipped in somewhat paler hues, it has brightened the lives of many of those vague Victorian aunts whose cloudy crinolines float through the gardens of the new 'Early Victorian' poetry. Neither perhaps know that, even in lingering on such things, they do but illustrate a more ancient parable and the mystery of a child set in the midst. Here, however, we may take the matter more lightly and leave it to tell its own story; but at least it is amusing to reflect that the old story of the unconsciously comic tombstone, the epitaph that was the butt of a hundred jests, is not really so far wrong after all; that there is a sort of truth concealed in that remarkable inscription, and that (leaving on one side a somewhat needless allusion to the Earl of Cork) we may repeat the epitaph with truth and even with profundity: 'He also painted in watercolours. For of such is the kingdom of heaven.'